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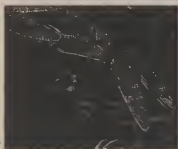
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Reflections

Robert Silverberg

Last issue's column was devoted to a discussion of the superheated technophobia currently surrounding gene-splicing research — the sort of hysteria that led to vandalization of experimental strawberry fields where a bacterium promoting resistance to frost damage in plants was being tested. Despite the high-minded environmentalist vandals' midnight raid, the test did go off on schedule, the results appear to be beneficial to agriculture, and as of this date — in midsummer, 1987 — the affected region of California (where I happen to live) has registered no ill effects from the test.

But since the anti-gene-splicing crusaders are still as vociferous as ever, and since their Luddite campaign may very well prove to be as successful as the one that has destroyed nuclear power in the United States, I think it's worthwhile to take a look at some of the other things currently going on in gene-splicing research. Among the terrifying Frankensteinian products now in the laboratory stage are —

1. A vaccine for AIDS. Genentech, Inc., of South San Francisco, announced in June, 1987, that a prototype AIDS vaccine killed the AIDS virus in test-tube experiments and kept it from infecting human immune-system cells. The vaccine was made from cells of a Chinese hamster, into which scientists spliced the gene that makes gp120, a protein that coats the AIDS virus. (Genentech scientists had synthesized gp120 for the first time a few months earlier.) When tested on

rats, the vaccine triggered the production of large quantities of AIDS-neutralizing antibody in the test animals. Plenty of work remains before any such AIDS vaccine goes into general use, of course: the next step involves vaccinating chimpanzees and then seeing if they can be infected with AIDS. Even that will not be conclusive — assuming that permission for such experiments can be obtained. "There is a possibility," a Genentech scientist said, "that humans or chimps could respond differently from rodents and may not mount the same neutralizing antibody response because immune systems vary." Nevertheless, they are optimistic about ultimate success.

2. At the University of California at Davis, use of recombinant DNA techniques — gene-splicing, that is — is aimed at producing trees that will grow faster or that are better able to resist disease, insects, and acid rain. The goal is to be able to breed stronger and better trees to meet the twenty-first century's timber demands without depleting forest resources. "The most exciting thing would be to alter the way a tree is put together," said Ronald Dinus, director of forest biology at the Institute of Paper Chemistry, a paper-industry research center in Wisconsin. He foresees trees that are richer in cellulose than normal ones, thus yielding more paper and less waste. Meanwhile, fruit-tree researchers are trying to produce trees with little wood and plenty of fruit. "Why



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should we have to have ladders to collect the fruit?" asked Professor Don J. Durzan of the Davis group. "Why should we have to prune?"

3. Monsanto Chemicals is implanting a leaf-dwelling bacterium toxic to cutworms in soil-dwelling bacteria, with the hope of eliminating that crop-destroying pest while it is still in the soil, before it begins its attack on plants.

4. Several gene-splicing laboratories are testing bovine growth hormones produced with the aid of genetically altered bacteria. The goal is to increase milk production by bringing cattle to maturity faster.

Most of these and a host of other products intended to boost food production or to fight cancer, heart attacks, and other maladies are currently hung up in the regulatory maze while conflicting government agencies battle over their safety and enthusiastic anti-science figures like Jeremy Rifkin of the biotechnology-fighting Foundation on Economic Trends keep things humming in the courts. It is, of course, a good idea to think twice, and then perhaps again, about the deeper implications of any gene-splicing experiment. There are risks as well as benefits, and it's foolhardy to argue otherwise. In the case of the Monsanto cutworm experiments, the problem is that the modified soil bacterium may prove to be toxic to beneficial soil-dwelling organisms as well as to the cutworms against which it's aimed. The bovine growth hormone, if it's costly to produce, will make it harder for small dairy farms to compete against the giants. And genetically engineered drugs may turn out to have catastrophic side-effects of the DES or thalidomide variety.

Nevertheless, one has to take *some*

risk in order to win benefits. There are those who shudder at the mere thought of gene-splicing research and hope to keep all of it bottled up forever by federal and state regulations.

The difficulty with that, though, is that other countries have scientists too, and most of them lack our elaborate and sophisticated systems of legal obstacles to research. Germany, Japan, England, France, and, very likely, the Soviet Union are capable of advanced recombinant-DNA-technology studies. While our Jeremy Rifkins execute their dazzling legal choreography, the course of medicine, agriculture, and half a dozen other fields is likely to be altered forever by work done in overseas laboratories — and we may find ourselves paying licensing fees to foreign companies to use the very things that we tried to outlaw when they were first invented here in the late twentieth century.

The real crunch, I think, will come over the AIDS vaccine. Here we have a collision of two contemporary hysterias — the carefully orchestrated anti-gene-splicing frenzy and the equally irrational fear that AIDS is about to burst forth into the heterosexual non-drug-using populace. An AIDS vaccine is going to be of value only to those who are not already infected with the deadly virus — i.e., the same "good" and "normal" people who seem to have the deepest dread of gene-splicing research. If millions of Americans manage to convince themselves that the only way they can hope to fend off AIDS is by encouraging those scientist guys to do more recombinant-DNA research, we may start to see an end to the present technophobic response to what's been going on in the genetic laboratories.

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Writer's guidelines are available through this editorial office. All such requests must be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Please note that our pamphlet "Constructing Scientific Fiction & Fantasy" has been discontinued and is no longer available.



THE IRON STAR
by Robert Silverberg
art: Terry Lee



Terry Lee
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The alien ship came drifting up from behind the far side of the neutron star just as I was going on watch. It looked a little like a miniature neutron star itself: a perfect sphere, metallic, dark. But neutron stars don't have six perky little outthrust legs and the alien craft did.

While I paused in front of the screen, the alien floated diagonally upward, cutting a swathe of darkness across the brilliantly starry sky like a fast-moving black hole. It even occulted the real black hole that lay 30 light-minutes away.

I stared at the strange vessel, fascinated and annoyed, wishing I had never seen it, wishing it would softly and suddenly vanish away. This mission was sufficiently complicated already. We hadn't needed an alien ship to appear on the scene. For five days now we had circled the neutron star in seesaw orbit with the aliens, 180 degrees apart. They hadn't said anything to us, and we didn't know how to say anything to them. I didn't feel good about that. I like things direct, succinct, known.

Lina Sorabji, busy enhancing sonar transparencies over at our improvised archaeology station, looked up from her work and caught me scowling. Lina is a slender, dark woman from Madras whose ancestors were priests and scholars when mine were hunting bison on the Great Plains. She said, "You shouldn't let it get to you like that, Tom."

"You know what it feels like, every time I see it cross the screen? It's like having a little speck wandering around on the visual field of your eye. Irritating, frustrating, maddening — and absolutely impossible to get rid of."

"You want to get rid of it?"

I shrugged. "Isn't this job tough enough? Attempting to scoop a sample from the core of a neutron star? Do we really have to have an alien spaceship looking over our shoulders while we work?"

"Maybe it's not a spaceship at all," Lina said cheerily. "Maybe it's just some kind of giant spacebug."

I suppose she was trying to amuse me. I wasn't amused. This was going to win me a place in the history of space exploration, sure: Chief Executive Officer of the first expedition from Earth ever to encounter intelligent extra-terrestrial life. Terrific. But that wasn't what IBM/Toshiba had hired me to do. And I'm more interested in completing assignments than in making history. You don't get paid for making history.

Basically, the aliens were a distraction from our real work, just as last month's discovery of a dead civilization on a nearby solar system had been, the one whose photographs Lina Sorabji was now studying. This was supposed to be a business venture involving the experimental use of new technology, not an archaeological mission or an exercise in interspecies diplomacy. And I knew that there was a ship from the Exxon/Hyundai combine loose somewhere in hyperspace right now, working on the same task we'd been sent out to handle. If they brought it off first, IBM/Toshiba would suffer a very severe loss of face, which is considered very bad on the

corporate level. What's bad for IBM/Toshiba would be exceedingly bad for me. For all of us.

I glowered at the screen. Then the orbit of the *Ben-wah Maru* carried us down and away, and the alien disappeared from my line of sight. But not for long, I knew.

As I keyed up the log reports from my sleep period, I said to Lina, "You have anything new today?" She had spent the past three weeks analyzing the dead-world data. You never know what the parent companies will see as potentially profitable.

"I'm down to 100-meter penetration now. There's a system of broad tunnels wormholing the entire planet. Some kind of pneumatic transportation network is my guess. Here, have a look."

A holoprint sprang into vivid life in the air between us. It was a sonar scan that we had taken from 10,000 kilometers out, reaching a short distance below the surface of the dead world. I saw odd-angled tunnels lined with gleaming luminescent tiles that still pulsed with dazzling colors, centuries after the cataclysm that had destroyed all life there. Amazing decorative patterns of bright lines were plainly visible along the tunnel walls, lines that swirled and overlapped and entwined and beckoned my eye into some adjoining dimension.

Trains of sleek snub-nosed vehicles were scattered like caterpillars everywhere in the tunnels. In them and around them lay skeletons, thousands of them, millions, a whole continent full of commuters slaughtered as they waited at the station for the morning express. Lina touched the fine scan and gave me a close look: biped creatures, broad skulls tapering sharply at the sides, long apelike arms, seven-fingered hands with what seemed like an opposable thumb at each end, pelvises enlarged into peculiar bony crests jutting far out from their hips. It wasn't the first time a hyperspace exploring vessel had come across relics of extinct extraterrestrial races, even a fossil or two. But these weren't fossils. These beings had died only a few hundred years ago. And they had all died at the same time.

I shook my head somberly. "Those are some tunnels. They might have been able to convert them into pretty fair radiation shelters, is my guess. If only they'd had a little warning of what was coming."

"They never knew what hit them."

"No," I said. "They never knew a thing. A supernova brewing right next door and they must not have been able to tell what was getting ready to happen."

Lina called up another print, and another, then another. During our brief flyby last month, our sensors had captured an amazing panoramic view of this magnificent lost civilization: wide streets, spacious parks, splendid public buildings, imposing private houses, the works. Bizarre architecture, all unlikely angles and jutting crests like its creators, but unquestionably grand, noble, impressive. There had been keen intelligence at work here,

and high artistry. Everything was intact and in a remarkable state of preservation, if you make allowances for the natural inroads that time and weather and, I suppose, the occasional earthquake will bring over 300 or 400 years. Obviously, this had been a wealthy, powerful society, stable and confident.

And between one instant and the next, it had all been stopped dead in its tracks, wiped out, extinguished, annihilated. Perhaps they had had a fraction of a second to realize that the end of the world had come, but no more than that. I saw what surely were family groups huddling together, skeletons clumped in threes or fours or fives. I saw what I took to be couples with their seven-fingered hands still clasped in a final exchange of love. I saw some kneeling in a weird elbows-down position that might have been one of — who can say? Prayer? Despair? Acceptance?

A sun had exploded, and this great world had died. I shuddered, not for the first time, thinking of it.

It hadn't even been their own sun. What had blown up was this one, 40 light-years away from them, the one that was now the neutron star about which we orbited and which once had been a main-sequence sun maybe three or four times as big as Earth's. Or else it had been the other one in this binary system, 30 light-minutes from the first, the blazing young giant companion star of which nothing remained except the black hole nearby. At the moment we had no way of knowing which of these two stars had gone supernova first. Whichever one it was, though, had sent a furious burst of radiation heading outward, a lethal flux of cosmic rays capable of destroying most or perhaps all life forms within a sphere 100 light-years in diameter.

The planet of the underground tunnels and the noble temples had simply been in the way. One of these two suns had come to the moment when all the fuel in its core had been consumed: hydrogen had been fused into helium, helium into carbon, carbon into neon, oxygen, sulfur, silicon, until at last a core of pure iron lay at its heart. There is no atomic nucleus more strongly bound than iron. The star had reached the point where its release of energy through fusion had to cease, and with the end of energy production, the star no longer could withstand the gravitational pressure of its own vast mass. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the core underwent a catastrophic collapse. Its matter was compressed — beyond the point of equilibrium. And rebounded. And sent forth an intense shock wave that went rushing through the star's outer layers at a speed of 15,000 kilometers a second.

Which ripped the fabric of the star apart, generating an explosion releasing more energy than a billion suns.

The shock wave would have continued outward and outward across space, carrying debris from the exploded star with it, and interstellar gas that the debris had swept up. A fierce sleet of radiation would have been riding on that wave, too: cosmic rays, X rays, radio waves, gamma rays, everything, all up and down the spectrum. If the sun that had gone supernova had had planets close by, they would have been vaporized immediately. Outly-

ing worlds of that system might merely have been fried.

The people of the world of the tunnels, 40 light-years distant, must have known nothing of the great explosion for a full generation after it had happened. But, all that while, the light of that shattered star was traveling toward them at a speed of 300,000 kilometers per second, and one night its frightful, baleful, unexpected glare must have burst suddenly into their sky in the most terrifying way. And almost in that same moment — for the deadly cosmic rays thrown off by the explosion move nearly at the speed of light — the killing blast of hard radiation would have arrived. And so these people and all else that lived on their world perished in terror and light.

All this took place 1,000 light-years from Earth: that surging burst of radiation will need another six centuries to complete its journey toward our home world. At that distance, the cosmic rays will do us little or no harm. But for a time that long-dead star will shine in our skies so brilliantly that it will be visible by day, and by night it will cast deep shadows, longer than those of the Moon.

That's still in Earth's future. Here, the fatal supernova and the second one that must have happened not long afterward were some 400 years in the past. What we had here now was a neutron star left over from one cataclysm and a black hole left over from the other. Plus the pathetic remains of a great civilization on a scorched planet orbiting a neighboring star. And now a ship from some alien culture. A busy corner of the galaxy, this one. A busy time for the crew of the IBM/Toshiba hyperspace ship *Ben-wah Maru*.

I was still going over the reports that had piled up at my station during my sleep period — mass-and-output readings on the neutron star, progress bulletins on the setup procedures for the neutronium scoop, and other routine stuff of that nature — when the communicator cone in front of me started to glow. I flipped it on. Cal Bjornsen, our communications guru, was calling from Brain Central downstairs.

Bjornsen is mostly black African with some Viking genes salted in. The whole left side of his face is cyborg, the result of some extreme bit of teenage carelessness. The story is that he was gravity-vaulting and lost polarity at 60 meters. The mix of ebony skin, blue eyes, blond hair, and sculpted titanium is an odd one, but I've seen a lot of faces less friendly than Cal's. He's a good man with anything electronic.

He said, "I think they're finally trying to send us messages, Tom."

I sat up fast. "What's that?"

"We've been pulling in signals of some sort for the past 90 minutes that didn't look random, but we weren't sure about it. A dozen or so different frequencies all up and down the line, mostly in the radio band, but we're also getting what seem to be infrared pulses, and something flashing in the ultraviolet range. A kind of scattershot noise effect, only it isn't noise."

"Are you sure of that?"

"The computer's still chewing on it," Bjornsen said. The fingers of his right hand glided nervously up and down his smooth metal cheek. "But we can see already that there are clumps of repetitive patterns."

"Coming from them? How do you know?"

"We didn't, at first. But the transmissions conked out when we lost line of sight with them, then started up again when they came back into view."

"I'll be right down," I said.

Bjornsen was normally a calm man, but he was running in frantic circles when I reached Brain Central three or four minutes later. There was stuff dancing on all the walls: sine waves, mainly, but plenty of other patterns jumping around on the monitors. He had already pulled in specialists from practically every department — the whole astronomy staff, two of the math guys, a couple from the external maintenance team, and somebody from engines. I felt preempted. Who was CEO on this ship, anyway? They were all babbling at once. "Fourier series," someone said. And someone yelled back, "Dirichlet factor." Then someone else said, "Gibbs phenomenon!" I heard Angie Seraphin insisting vehemently, "— continuous except possibly for a finite number of finite discontinuities in the interval $-\pi$ to π —"

"Hold it," I said. "What's going on?"

More babble, more gibberish. I got them quiet again and repeated my question, aiming it this time at Bjornsen.

"We have the analysis now," he said.

"So?"

"You understand that it's only guesswork, but Brain Central gives good guess. The way it looks, they seem to want us to broadcast a carrier wave they can tune in on, and just to talk to them while they lock in with some sort of word-to-word translating device of theirs."

"That's what Brain Central thinks they're saying?"

"It's the most plausible semantic content of the patterns they're transmitting," Bjornsen answered.

I felt a chill. The aliens had word-to-word translating devices? That was a lot more than we could claim. Brain Central is one very smart computer, and if it thought that it had correctly deciphered the message coming in, then in all likelihood it had. An astonishing accomplishment, taking a bunch of ones and zeros put together by an alien mind and culling some sense out of them.

But even Brain Central isn't capable of word-to-word translation out of some unknown language. Nothing in our technology is. The alien message had been *designed* to be easy: put together, most likely, in a careful high-redundancy manner, the computer equivalent of picture writing. Any race able to undertake interstellar travel ought to have a computer powerful enough to sweat the essential meaning out of a message like that, and we did. We couldn't go farther than that, though. Let the entropy of that message — that is, the unexpectedness of it, the unpredictability of its semantic content

— rise just a little beyond the picture-writing level, and Brain Central would be lost. A computer that knows French should be able to puzzle out Spanish, and maybe even Greek. But Chinese? A tough proposition. And an *alien* language? Languages may start out logical, but they don't stay that way. And when its underlying grammatical assumptions were put together in the first place by beings with nervous systems that were wired up in ways entirely different from our own, well, the notion of instantaneous decoding became hopeless.

Yet our computer said that their computer could do word-to-word. That was scary.

On the other hand, if we couldn't talk to them, we couldn't begin to find out what they were doing here and what threat, if any, they might pose to us. By revealing our language to them, we might be handing them some sort of advantage, but I couldn't be sure of that, and it seemed to me we had to take the risk.

It struck me as a good idea to get some backing for that decision, though. After a dozen years as CEO aboard various corporate ships, I knew the protocols. You did what you thought was right, but you didn't go all the way out on the limb by yourself if you could help it.

"Request a call for a meeting of the corporate staff," I told Bjornsen.

It wasn't so much a scientific matter now as a political one. The scientists would probably be gung-ho to go blasting straight ahead with making contact. But I wanted to hear what the Toshiba people would say, and the IBM people, and the military people. So we got everyone together, and I laid the situation out and asked for a consensus process. And let them go at it, hammer and tongs.

Instant polarization. The Toshiba people were scared silly of the aliens.

"We must be cautious," Nakamura said.

"Caution, yes," said her cohort Nagy-Szabo. "There may be danger to Earth. We have no knowledge of the aims and motivations of these beings. Avoid all contact with them."

Nakamura went even further. "We should withdraw from the area immediately," she said, "and return to Earth for additional instructions."

That drew hot opposition from Jorgensen and Kalliotis, the IBM people. "We have work to do here," they said. "We should do it." They grudgingly conceded the need to be wary, but strongly urged continuation of the mission and advocated a circumspect opening of contact with the other ship. I think they were already starting to think about alien marketing demographics. Maybe I did them an injustice. Maybe.

The military people were about evenly divided between the two factions. A couple of them, the hair-splitting career-minded ones, wanted to play it absolutely safe and clear out of here fast, and the others, the up-and-away hero types, spoke out in favor of forging ahead with contact and to hell with the risks.

I could see there wasn't going to be any consensus. It was going to come down to me to decide.

By nature I am cautious. I might have voted with Nakamura in favor of immediate withdrawal, however that would have made my ancient cold-eyed Sioux forebears howl. Yet, in the end what swayed me was an argument that came from Bryce-Williamson, one of the fiercest of the military sorts. He said that we didn't dare turn tail and run for home without making contact, because the aliens would take that as either a hostile act or a stupid one, and either way they might just slap some kind of tracer on us that ultimately would enable them to discover the location of our home world. True caution, he had said, required us to try to find out what these people were all about before we made any move to leave the scene. We couldn't just run and we couldn't simply ignore them.

I sat quietly for a long time, weighing everything.

"Well?" Bjornsen asked. "What do you want to do, Tom?"

"Send them a broadcast," I said. "Give them greetings in the name of Earth and all its peoples. Extend to them the benevolent warm wishes of the board of directors of IBM/Toshiba. And then we'll wait and see."

We waited. But for a long while we didn't see.

Two days, and then some. We went round and round the neutron star, and they went round and round the neutron star, and no further communication came from them. We beamed them all sorts of messages at all sorts of frequencies along the spectrum, both in the radio band and via infrared and ultraviolet as well, so that they'd have plenty of material to work with. Perhaps their translator gadget wasn't all that good, I told myself hopefully. Perhaps it was stripping its gears, trying to fathom the pleasant little packets of semantic data that we had sent them.

On the third day of silence I began feeling restless. There was no way we could begin the work we had been sent here to do, not with aliens watching. The Toshiba people — the Ultra Cautious faction — got more and more nervous. Even the IBM representatives began to act a little twitchy. I started to question the wisdom of having overruled the advocates of a no-contact policy. Although the parent companies hadn't seriously expected us to run into aliens, they had covered that eventuality in our instructions, and we were under orders to do minimum tipping of our hands if we found ourselves observed by strangers. But it was too late to call back our messages, and I was still eager to find out what would happen next. So we watched and waited, and then we waited and watched. Round and round the neutron star.

We had been parked in orbit for ten days now around the neutron star, an orbit calculated to bring us no closer to its surface than 9,000 kilometers at the closest skim. That was close enough for us to carry out our work, but not so close that we would be subjected to troublesome and dangerous tidal effects.

The neutron star had been formed in the supernova explosion that had destroyed the smaller of the two suns in what had once been a binary-star system here. At the moment of the cataclysmic collapse of the stellar sphere, all its matter had come rushing inward with such force that electrons and protons were driven into each other to become a soup of pure neutrons. Which then were squeezed so tightly that they were forced virtually into contact with one another, creating a smooth globe of the strange stuff that we called neutronium, a billion billion times denser than steel and a hundred billion billion times more incompressible.

That tiny ball of neutronium glowing dimly in our screens was the neutron star. It was just 18 kilometers in diameter, but its mass was greater than that of Earth's sun. That gave it a gravitational field a quarter of a billion billion times as strong as that of the surface of Earth. If we could somehow set foot on it, we wouldn't just be squashed flat, we'd be instantly reduced to fine powder by the colossal tidal effects — the difference in gravitational pull between the soles of our feet and the tops of our heads, stretching us toward and away from the neutron star's center with a kick of 18 billion kilograms.

A ghostly halo of electromagnetic energy surrounded the neutron star: X rays, radio waves, gammas, and an oily, crackling flicker of violet light. The neutron star was rotating on its axis some 550 times a second, and powerful jets of electrons were spouting from its magnetic poles at each sweep, sending forth a beaconlike pulsar broadcast of the familiar type that we have been able to detect since the middle of the twentieth century.

Behind that zone of fiercely outflung radiation lay the neutron star's atmosphere: an envelope of gaseous iron a few centimeters thick. Below that, our scan had told us, was a 2-kilometer-thick crust of normal matter, heavy elements only, ranging from molybdenum on up to transuranics with atomic numbers as high as 140. And within that was the neutronium zone, the stripped nuclei of iron packed unimaginably close together, an ocean of strangeness nine kilometers deep. What lay at the heart of *that*, we could only guess.

We had come here to plunge a probe into the neutronium zone and carry off a spoonful of star stuff that weighed 100 billion tons per cubic centimeter.

No sort of conventional landing on the neutron star was possible or even conceivable. Not only was the gravitational pull beyond our comprehension — anything that was capable of withstanding the tidal effects would still have to cope with an escape velocity requirement of 200,000 kilometers per second when it tried to take off, two-thirds the speed of light — but the neutron star's surface temperature was something like 3.5 million degrees. The surface temperature of our own sun is 6,000 degrees, and we don't try to make landings there. Even at this distance, our heat and radiation shields were straining to the limits to keep us from being cooked. We didn't intend

to go any closer.

What IBM/Toshiba wanted us to do was to put a miniature hyperspace ship into orbit around the neutron star: an astonishing little vessel no bigger than a clenched fist, powered by a fantastically scaled-down version of the drive that had carried us through the space-time manifold across a span of 1,000 light-years in a dozen weeks. The little ship was a slave-drone; we would operate it from the *Ben-wah Maru*. Or, rather, Brain Central would. In a maneuver that had taken 50 computer-years to program, we would send the miniature into hyperspace and bring it out again *right inside the neutron star*. And keep it there a billionth of a second, long enough for it to gulp the spoonful of neutronium we had been sent here to collect. Then we'd head for home, with the miniature ship following us along the same hyperpath.

We'd head for home, that is, unless the slave-drone's brief intrusion into the neutron star released disruptive forces that splattered us all over this end of the galaxy. IBM/Toshiba didn't really think that was going to happen. In theory a neutron star was one of the most stable things there is in the universe, and the math didn't indicate that taking a nip from its interior would cause real problems. This neighborhood had already had its full quota of giant explosions anyway.

Still, the possibility existed. Especially since there was a black hole just 30 light-minutes away, a souvenir of the second and much larger supernova bang that had happened here in the recent past. Having a black hole nearby is a little like playing with an extra wild card whose existence isn't made known to the players until some randomly chosen moment midway through the game. If we destabilized the neutron star in some way not anticipated by the scientists back on Earth, we might just find ourselves going for a visit to the event horizon instead of getting to go home. Or we might not. There was only one way of finding out.

I didn't know, by the way, what use the parent companies planned to make of the neutronium we had been hired to bring them. I hoped it was a good one.

But obviously, we weren't going to tackle any of this while there was an alien ship in the vicinity. So all we could do was wait. And see. Right now we were doing a lot of waiting, and no seeing at all.

Two days later Cal Bjornsen said, "We're getting a message back from them now. Audio only. In English."

We had wanted that; we had even hoped for that. And yet it shook me to learn that it was happening.

"Let's hear it," I said.

"The relay's coming over ship channel seven."

I tuned in. What I heard was an obviously synthetic voice, no undertones or overtones, not much inflection. It was trying to mimic the speech rhythms of what we had sent the aliens, and I suppose they were actually

doing a fair job of it, but the result was still unmistakably mechanical-sounding. Of course, there might be nothing on board that ship but a computer, I thought, or maybe robots. I wish now that they had been robots.

It had the absolute and utter familiarity of a recurring dream. In stiff, halting, but weirdly comprehensible English came the first greetings of an alien race to the people of the planet of Earth. "This who speak be First of Nine Sparg," the voice said.

Nine Sparg, we soon realized from context, was the name of their planet. First might have been the speaker's name, or his — hers, its? — title; that was unclear, and stayed that way.

In an awkward pidgin English that we nevertheless had little trouble understanding, First expressed gratitude for our transmission and asked us to send more words. To send a dictionary, in fact: now that they had the algorithm for our speech, they needed more content to jam in behind it so that we could go on to exchange more complex statements than "Hello" and "How are you?"

Bjornsen queried me on the override. "We've got an English program that we could start feeding them," he said. "30,000 words: that should give them plenty. You want me to put it on for them?"

"Not so fast," I said. "We need to edit it first."

"For what?"

"Anything that might help them find the location of Earth. That's in our orders, under Eventuality of Contact with Extraterrestrials. Remember, I have Nakamura and Nagy-Szabo breathing down my neck, telling me that there's a ship full of bogeymen out there and we mustn't have anything to do with them. I don't believe that myself. But right now we don't know how friendly these Spargs are, and we aren't supposed to bring strangers home with us."

"But how could a dictionary entry —"

"Suppose the sun — *our* sun — is defined as a yellow G2-type star," I said. "That gives them a pretty good beginning. Or something about the constellations as seen from Earth. I don't know, Cal. I just want to make sure we don't accidentally hand these beings a road map to our home planet before we find out what sort of critters they are."

Three of us spent half a day screening the dictionary, and we put Brain Central to work on it, too. In the end we pulled seven words — you'd laugh if you knew which they were, but we wanted to be careful — and sent the rest across to the Spargs. They were silent for nine or ten hours. When they came back on the air, their command of English was immensely more fluent. Frighteningly more fluent. Yesterday, First had sounded like a tourist using a Fifty Handy Phrases program. A day later, First's command of English was as good as that of an intelligent Japanese who has been living in the United States for ten or fifteen years.

It was a tense, wary conversation. Or so it seemed to me, the way it began

to seem that First was male and that his way of speaking was brusque and bluntly probing. I may have been wrong on every count.

First wanted to know who we were and why we were here. Jumping right in, getting down to the heart of the matter. I felt a little like a butterfly collector who has wandered onto the grounds of a fusion plant and was being interrogated by a security guard. But I kept my tone and phrasing as neutral as I could, and told him that our planet was called Earth and that we had come on a mission of exploration and investigation.

So had they, he told me. Where is Earth?

Pretty straightforward of him, I thought. I answered that I lacked at this point a means of explaining galactic positions to him in terms that he would understand. I did volunteer the information that Earth was not anywhere close at hand.

He was willing to drop that line of inquiry for the time being. He shifted to the other obvious one:

What were we investigating?

Certain properties of collapsed stars, I informed him after a bit of hesitation.

And which properties were those?

I told him that we didn't have enough vocabulary in common for me to try to explain that either.

The Nine Sparg captain seemed to accept that evasion, too. And provided me with a pause that indicated that it was my turn. Fair enough.

When I asked him what *he* was doing here, he replied without any apparent trace of evasiveness that he had come on a mission of historical inquiry. I pressed for details. It has to do with the ancestry of our race, he said. We used to live in this part of the galaxy, before the great explosion.

No hesitation at all about telling me that. It struck me that First was being less reticent about dealing with my queries than I was with his, but of course I had no way of judging whether I was hearing the truth from him.

"I'd like to know more," I said, as much as a test as anything else. "How long ago did your people flee this great explosion? And how far from here is your present home world?"

A long silence: several minutes. I wondered uncomfortably if I had overplayed my hand. If they were as edgy about our finding their home world as I was about their finding ours, I had to be careful not to push them into an overreaction. They might just think that the safest thing to do would be to blow us out of the sky as soon as they had learned all they could from us.

But when First spoke again, it was only to say, "Are you willing to establish contact in the visual band?"

"Is such a thing possible?"

"We think so," he said.

I thought about it. Would letting them see what we looked like give them any sort of clue to the location of Earth? Perhaps, but it seemed farfetched.

Maybe they'd be able to guess that we were carbon-based oxygen-breathers, but the risk of allowing them to know that seemed relatively small. And in any case we'd find out what *they* looked like. An even trade, right?

I had my doubts that their video transmission system could be made compatible with our receiving equipment. But I gave First the go-ahead and turned the microphone over to the communications staff. Who struggled with the problem for a day and a half. Sending the signal back and forth was no big deal, but breaking it down into information that would paint a picture on a cathode-ray tube was a different matter. The communications people at both ends talked and talked and talked, while I fretted about how much technical information about us we were revealing to the Spargs. The tinkering went on and on, and nothing appeared on screen except occasional strings of horizontal lines. We sent them more data about how our television system worked. They made further adjustments in their transmission devices. This time we got spots instead of lines. We sent even more data. Were they leading us on? And were we telling them too much? I came finally to the position that trying to make the video link work had been a bad idea, and started to tell the communications crew that. But then the haze of drifting spots on my screen abruptly cleared, and I found myself looking into the face of an alien being.

An alien face, yes. Extremely alien. Suddenly this whole interchange was kicked up to a new level of reality.

A hairless wedge-shaped head, flat and broad on top, tapering to a sharp point below. Corrugated skin that looked as thick as heavy rubber. Two chilly eyes in the center of that wide forehead, and two more at its extreme edges. Three mouths, vertical slits, side by side: one for speaking and the other two, maybe for separate intake of fluids and solids. The whole business supported by three long columnar necks as thick as a man's wrist, separated by open spaces two or three centimeters wide. What was below the neck we never got to see. But the head alone was plenty.

They probably thought we were just as strange.

With video established, First and I picked up our conversation right where he had broken it off the day before. Once more he was not in the least shy about telling me things.

He had been able to calculate in our units of time the date of the great explosion that had driven his people from their home world: it had taken place 387 years ago. He didn't use the word *supernova* because it hadn't been included in the 30,000-word vocabulary we had sent them, but that was obviously what he meant by "the great explosion." The 387-year figure squared pretty well with our own calculations, which were based on an analysis of the surface temperature and rate of rotation of the neutron star.

The Nine Sparg people had had plenty of warning that their sun was behaving oddly — the first signs of instability had become apparent more

than a century before the blowup — and they had devoted all their energy for several generations to the job of packing up and clearing out. It had taken many years, it seemed, for them to accomplish their migration to the distant new world they had chosen for their new home.

Did that mean, I asked myself, that their method of interstellar travel was much slower than ours, and that they had needed decades or even a century to cover 50 or 100 light-years? Earth had less to worry about, then. Even if they wanted to make trouble for us, they wouldn't be easily able to reach us, 1,000 light-years from here. Or was First saying that their new world was *really* distant — all the way across the galaxy, perhaps, 70,000 or 80,000 light-years away, or even in some other galaxy altogether? If that was the case, we were up against truly superior beings. But there was no easy way for me to question him about such things without telling him things about our own hyperdrive and our distance from this system that I didn't care to have him know.

After a long and evidently difficult period of settling in on the new world, First went on, the Nine Sparg folk finally were well enough established to launch an inquiry into the condition of their former home planet. Thus his mission to the supernova site.

"But we are in great mystery," First admitted, and it seemed to me that a note of sadness and bewilderment had crept into his mechanical-sounding voice. "We have come to what certainly is the right location. Yet nothing seems to be correct here. We find only this little iron star. And of our former planet there is no trace."

I stared at that peculiar and unfathomable four-eyed face, that three-columned neck, those tight vertical mouths, and to my surprise something close to compassion awoke in me. I had been dealing with this creature as though he were a potential enemy capable of leading armadas of war to my world and conquering it. But in fact, he might be merely a scholarly explorer who was making a nostalgic pilgrimage and running into problems with it. I decided to relax my guard just a little.

"Have you considered," I said, "that you might not be in the right location after all?"

"What do you mean?"

"As we were completing our journey toward what you call the iron star," I said, "we discovered a planet 40 light-years from here that beyond much doubt had had a great civilization, and that evidently was close enough to the exploding star system here to have been devastated by it. We have pictures of it that we could show you. Perhaps *that* was your home world."

Even as I was saying it, the idea started to seem foolish to me. The skeletons we had photographed on the dead world had had broad tapering heads that might perhaps have been similar to those of First, but they hadn't shown any evidence of this unique triple-neck arrangement. Besides, First had said that his people had had several generations to prepare for evacua-

tion. Would they have left so many millions of their people behind to die? It looked obvious from the way those skeletons were scattered around that the inhabitants of that planet hadn't had the slightest clue that doom was due to overtake them that day. And finally, I realized that First had plainly said that it was his own world's sun that had exploded, not some neighboring star. The supernova had happened here. The dead world's sun was still intact.

"Can you show me your pictures?" he said.

It seemed pointless. But I felt odd about retracting my offer. And in the new rapport that had sprung up between us, I could see no harm in it.

I told Lina Sorabji to feed her sonar transparencies into the relay pickup. It was easy enough for Cal Bjornsen to shunt them into our video transmission to the alien ship.

The Nine Sparg captain withheld his comment until we had shown him the batch.

Then he said, "Oh, that was not our world. That was the world of the Garvalekkinon people."

"The Garvalekkinon?"

"We knew them. A neighboring race, not related to us. Sometimes, on rare occasions, we traded with them. Yes, they must all have died when the star exploded. It is too bad."

"They look as though they had no warning," I said. "Look: can you see them there, waiting in the train stations?"

The triple mouths fluttered in what might have been the Nine Sparg equivalent of a nod.

"I suppose they did not know the explosion was coming."

"You suppose? You mean you didn't tell them?"

All four eyes blinked at once. Expression of puzzlement.

"Tell them? Why should we have told them? We were busy with our preparations. We had no time for them. Of course, the radiation would have been harmful to them, but why was that our concern? They were not related to us. They were nothing to us."

I had trouble believing I had heard him correctly. A neighboring people. Occasional trading partners. Your sun is about to blow up, and it's reasonable to assume that nearby solar systems will be affected. You have 50 to 100 years of advance notice yourselves, and you can't even take the trouble to let these other people know what's going to happen?

I said, "You felt no need at all to warn them? That isn't easy for me to understand."

Again the four-eyed shrug.

"I have explained it to you already," said First. "They were not of our kind. They were nothing to us."

I excused myself on some flimsy excuse and broke contact. And sat and thought a long, long while. Listening to the words of the Nine Sparg captain

echoing in my mind. And thinking of the millions of skeletons scattered like straws in the tunnels of that dead world that the supernova had baked. A whole people left to die because it was inconvenient to take five minutes to send them a message. Or perhaps because it simply never had occurred to anybody to bother.

The families, huddling together. The children, reaching out. The husbands and wives with hands interlocked.

A world of busy, happy, intelligent people. Boulevards and temples. Parks and gardens. Paintings, sculpture, poetry, music. History, philosophy, science. And a sudden star in the sky, and everything gone in a moment.

Why should we have told them? They were nothing to us.

I knew something of the history of my own people. We had experienced casual extermination, too. But at least when the white settlers had done it to us, it was because they had wanted our land.

For the first time I understood the meaning of alien.

I turned on the external screen and stared out at the unfamiliar sky of this place. The neutron star was barely visible, a dull red dot, far down in the lower left quadrant, and the black hole was high.

Once they had both been stars. What havoc must have attended their destruction! It must have been the Sparg sun that blew first, the one that had become the neutron star. And then, 50 or 100 years later, perhaps, the other, larger star had gone the same route. Another titanic supernova, a great flare of killing light. But of course, everything for hundreds of light-years around had perished already in the first blast.

The second sun had been too big to leave a neutron star behind. So great was its mass that the process of collapse had continued on beyond the neutron-star stage, matter crushing in upon itself until it broke through the normal barriers of space and took on a bizarre and almost unthinkable form, creating an object of infinitely small volume that was nevertheless of infinite density: a black hole, a pocket of incomprehensibility where once a star had been.

I stared now at the black hole before me.

I couldn't see it, of course. So powerful was the surface gravity of that grotesque thing that nothing could escape from it, not even electromagnetic radiation, not the merest particle of light. The ultimate in invisibility cloaked that infinitely deep hole in space.

But though the black hole itself was invisible, the effects that its presence caused were not. That terrible gravitational pull would rip apart and swallow any solid object that came too close, and so the hole was surrounded by a bright ring of dust and gas several hundred kilometers across. These shimmering particles constantly tumbled toward that insatiable mouth, colliding as they spiraled in, releasing flaring fountains of radiation, red-shifted into the visual spectrum by the enormous gravity: the bright green of helium, the majestic purple of hydrogen, the crimson of oxygen. That outpouring of

energy was the death-cry of doomed matter. That rainbow whirlpool of blazing light was the beacon marking the maw of the black hole.

I found it oddly comforting to stare at that thing. To contemplate that zone of eternal quietude from which there was no escape. Pondering so inexorable and unanswerable an infinity was more soothing than thinking of a world of busy people destroyed by the indifference of their neighbors. Black holes offer no choices, no complexities, no shades of disagreement. They are absolute.

Why should we have told them? They were nothing to us.

After a time I restored contact with the Nine Sparg ship. First came to the screen at once, ready to continue our conversation.

"There is no question that our world once was located here," he said at once. "We have checked and rechecked the coordinates. But the changes have been extraordinary."

"Have they?"

"Once, there were two stars here, our own and the brilliant blue one that was nearby. Our history is very specific on that point: a brilliant blue star that lit the entire sky. Now we have only the iron star. Apparently, it has taken the place of our sun. But where has the blue one gone? Could the explosion have destroyed it, too?"

I frowned. Did they really not know? Could a race be capable of attaining an interstellar spacedrive and an interspecies translating device, and nevertheless not have arrived at any understanding of the neutron star/black hole cosmogony?

Why not? They were aliens. They had come by all their understanding of the universe via a route different from ours. They might well have overlooked this feature or that of the universe about them.

"The blue star —" I began.

But First spoke right over me, saying, "It is a mystery that we must devote all our energies to solving, or our mission will be fruitless. But let us talk of other things. You have said little of your own mission. And of your home world. I am filled with great curiosity, Captain, about those subjects."

I'm sure you are, I thought.

"We have only begun our return to space travel," said First. "Thus far we have encountered no other intelligent races. And so we regard this meeting as fortunate. It is our wish to initiate contact with you. Quite likely some aspects of your technology would be valuable to us. And there will be much that you wish to purchase from us. Therefore, we would be glad to establish trade relations with you."

As you did with the Garvalekkinon people, I said to myself.

I said, "We can speak of that tomorrow, Captain. I grow tired now. But before we break contact for the day, allow me to offer you the beginning of a solution to the mystery of the disappearance of the blue sun."

The four eyes widened. The slitted mouths parted in what seemed surely

to be excitement.

"Can you do that?"

I took a deep breath.

"We have some preliminary knowledge. Do you see the place opposite the iron star, where energies boil and circle in the sky? As we entered this system, we found certain evidence there that may explain the fate of your former blue sun. You would do well to center your investigations on that spot."

"We are most grateful," said First.

"And now, Captain, I must bid you good night. Until tomorrow, Captain."

"Until tomorrow," said the alien.

I was awakened in the middle of my sleep period by Lina Sorabji and Bryce-Williamson, both of them looking flushed and sweaty. I sat up, blinking and shaking my head.

"It's the alien ship," Bryce-Williamson blurted. "It's approaching the black hole."

"Is it, now?"

"Dangerously close," said Lina. "What do they think they're doing? Don't they know?"

"I don't think so," I said. "I suggested that they go exploring there. Evidently they don't regard it as a bad idea."

"You sent them there?" she said incredulously.

With a shrug I said, "I told them that if they went over there, they might find the answer to the question of where one of their missing suns went. I guess they've decided to see if I was right."

"We have to warn them," said Bryce-Williamson. "Before it's too late. Especially if we're responsible for sending them there. They'll be furious with us once they realize that we failed to warn them of the danger."

"By the time they realize it," I replied calmly, "it *will* be too late. And then their fury won't matter, will it? They won't be able to tell us how annoyed they are with us. Or to report to their home world, for that matter, that they had an encounter with intelligent aliens who might be worth exploiting."

He gave me an odd look. The truth was starting to sink in.

I turned on the external screens and punched up a close look at the black hole region. Yes, there was the alien ship, the little metallic sphere, the six odd outthrust legs. It was in the zone of criticality now. It seemed hardly to be moving at all. And it was growing dimmer and dimmer as it slowed. The gravitational field had it, and it was being drawn in. Blacking out, becoming motionless. Soon it would have gone beyond the point where outside observers could perceive it. Already it was beyond the point of turning back.

I heard Lina sobbing behind me. Bryce-Williamson was muttering to himself: praying, perhaps.

I said, "Who can say what they would have done to us — in their casual, indifferent way — once they came to Earth? We know now that Spargs worry only about Spargs. Anybody else is just so much furniture." I shook my head. "To hell with them. They're gone, and in a universe this big we'll probably never come across any of them again, or they us. Which is just fine. We'll be a lot better off having nothing at all to do with them."

"But to die that way —" Lina murmured. "To sail blindly into a black hole —"

"It is a great tragedy," said Bryce-Williamson.

"A tragedy for them," I said. "For us, a reprieve, I think. And tomorrow we can get moving on the neutronium-scoop project." I tuned up the screen to the next level. The boiling cloud of matter around the mouth of the black hole blazed fiercely. But of the alien ship there was nothing to be seen.

A great tragedy, yes, I thought. The valiant exploratory mission that had sought the remains of the Nine Sparg home world has been lost with all hands. No hope of rescue. A pity that they hadn't known how unpleasant black holes could be.

But why should we have told them? They were nothing to us. ●

[*"The Iron Star" by Robert Silverberg is just one of the many stories that will appear in the collection entitled The Universe, edited by Byron Preiss, Bantam Books, 1988.*]

THE LITERARY CAREER OF ROBERT SILVERBERG

Current Directions . . .

From the moment I picked up a copy of *Amazing Stories* in 1948 I wanted to be a science-fiction writer. I was a junior-high-school student in Brooklyn then, a bookish little kid interested in dinosaurs and astronomy and stamp collecting and botany and a dozen other things, and I had already read some H. G. Wells and some Jules Verne, and was looking around for more of the same when I stumbled on the garish SF pulp magazines of the era. They revolutionized my life. I didn't imagine, back in those barely pubescent days, that I'd ever be able to write novels to match *The Time Machine* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, but it didn't seem all that impossible to produce short stories good enough for *Amazing* and *Startling* and *Planet Stories* and the others of that ilk. Before long I was sending dreadful, unreadable little stories on their way to the editors, and I was getting kindly, tolerant rejection notes back. But perseverance will carry the day, especially if there's a shred of talent behind it, and by the time I was eighteen or so, a few years later, I was getting checks instead of rejections. A Scottish magazine called *Nebula* was the first, and before long most of the American SF magazines had succumbed to my work as well. I sold my first to *Amazing*

Stories in the summer of 1955, just seven years after picking up my first issue of that magazine during my eighth-grade lunch hour. As for my doubts about writing longer works, they were short-lived: I sold a novel, *Revolt on Alpha C*, to the Thomas Y. Crowell Company in 1954, when I was a sophomore at Columbia University.

And so I've lived happily ever after as a full-time science-fiction writer, despite war and pestilence, marriage and divorce, fire and earthquake, and even the occasional rejection slip. Though I've written all sorts of things from serious scholarly works (*Mound Builders of Ancient America*, *The Realm of Prester John*, etc.) to westerns and mysteries and the occasional true confession, I'd say 85% of my overall output in the past thirty-odd years has been science fiction, and since 1971 I've hardly written anything else at all. The result has been a pleasant existence, marked by enough success of the artistic and financial kind to convince my family that I wasn't out of my mind when I announced that I was going to write science fiction for a living. There are times when I get horrendously sick of the stuff, and there was a five-year period in the mid-1970s when I wasn't writing and would tell anyone within earshot that I never planned to write anything again, but the virus seems incurable if you catch it young enough, and, having gotten my retirement out of my system when I was still fairly young, I doubt now that I'll ever escape my karmic obligation to go on reading and writing SF. I've just finished a long novel called *At Winter's End*, which Warner Books will publish in the spring of 1988, and thoughts of the next book are already stirring in my mind.

I've won the usual awards and honors, starting with a Hugo all the way back in 1956 (I think I still hold the distinction of being the youngest writer ever to win one) and going on through various Hugos and Nebulae to the 1986 Nebula for "Sailing to Byzantium." My books have been translated into fifteen or twenty languages, my stories have appeared in all the SF magazines plus such places as *Playboy*, *Omni*, and *Penthouse*, and for my sins I've served a term (1967-68) as President of the Science Fiction Writers of America. I've lived in California the past couple of decades, and I spend my time gardening, reading, and traveling to far and exotic places when I'm not beating up my word processor. I'm married to Karen Haber, herself a writer just getting going on a career in SF, who has been an invaluable help to me as in-house editor and collaborator.

... and Past Achievements

Revolt on Alpha C, 1955.

Lost Race of Mars, 1960.

Thorns, 1967.

Hawksbill Station, 1968.

Nightwings, 1969.

The Man in the Maze, 1969.

Up the Line, 1969.

Tower of Glass, 1970.

A Time of Changes, 1971.

The World Inside, 1971.

The Book of Skulls, 1971.

Dying Inside, 1972.

Lord Valentine's Castle, 1980.

Majipoor Chronicles, 1981.

Valentine Pontifex, 1983.

Gilgamesh the King, 1984.

Tom O'Bedlam, 1985.

Star of Gypsies, 1986.

At Winter's End, 1988.

Hugo Awards

1956: Most Promising New Writer

1969: *Nightwings* (novel)

Nebula Awards

1969: "Passengers" (short story)

1971: *A Time of Changes* (novel); "Good News from the Vatican" (short story)

1974: "Born with the Dead" (novella)

1985: "Sailing to Byzantium" (novella)

LIVING IN THE BASEBALL GAME

by Malcolm K. McClintick

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When Morton Fersting was absolutely certain nobody else was in the house but himself, he locked the outer doors, turned off the phones, and entered his living room, a long, tastefully decorated chamber with the projector at one end. At the press of a button on his remote panel, all five windows soundlessly closed. He started the projector, a cylindrical contraption of dull gray metal the size of a bread loaf.

The three-dimensional image was startlingly real. One instant Fersting was in a normal room in a normal house; the next instant he stood just behind home plate in a major league ballpark on a warm summer's day the likes of which the world had not seen in forty years, a few wispy white clouds drifting in a deep blue sky, tens of thousands of noisy fans packed into the stadium, the visiting team in the outfield, the pitcher on the mound, catcher and umpire waiting.

A warm breeze tugged gently at Fersting's uniform as he hefted the Louisville Slugger (a priceless antique, if real) and strode forward to take his position in the batter's box. He knew it was illusion, yet it was real as far as his senses were concerned.

The crowd roared. He assumed his right-handed batting stance and squinted into the hard sunshine. The pitcher wound. For a fraction of a second, Fersting saw the ball and knew it was a fast ball, directly over the plate, right through the heart of the strike zone. At precisely the right instant, he swung the 34-inch bat, stepping into the pitch and connecting squarely with it.

A loud crack, and he was running, running, tossing the bat into the dirt, and heading for first with the scream of the crowd in his ears. The ball missed clearing the center-field fence by an inch — ground-rule double. Fersting trotted around to second base and stopped to grin, panting, the sun in his face. *God, he thought, this is living!*

Across the diamond the next batter was coming up to the plate. Behind the blue-suited umpire, Fersting could see his living room, a strange slice of door, walls, carpet, and ceiling that blurred into the stands at either side, reminding him that he was living inside a projection.

The program was random. The next batter struck out to end the inning, and Fersting trotted across the infield. He passed home plate and walked to his living-room wall, found the projection controls, and turned off the game. The ballpark — sunlight, players, crowd, grass — disappeared, leaving the room dull and lifeless. But there would be other times.

Fersting stowed the projector in a cabinet and paused to glance at the stack of projection discs lying to one side, then he closed and locked the cabinet doors.

"Morton never had any girlfriends," Harriet Fersting said conversationally but with a trace of malice. "Morton was as shy and backward as a teenager as he is now."

Harriet was Fersting's wife of seven years. Sitting at the kitchen table with them were the Hansens, Pete and Sharon. All evening Pete had flirted with Harriet, and she'd flirted back.

Fersting scowled. Pete Hansen was a tall, handsome, athletic guy, like a baseball player. His broad shoulders and narrow waist added to the athletic image, along with his artificial tan. Fersting, on the other hand, was plump, prematurely balding, with blunt features, short legs, and rounded shoulders, about as athletic as a frog. He glared as he dealt the cards, watching Hansen flash straight white teeth at Harriet, and wondered why she'd married him in the first place.

For his mind, he supposed. His inventive mind, capable of creating all manner of illusions on a computer, capable of programming the projector to simulate almost anything, any world, any diversion.

"I was never interested in girls," he said, now that the cards were dealt. "Till I met Harriet, that is."

"Women are a hobby of mine," the tall athletic Hansen said, grinning boyishly at Fersting's wife and ogling her build, which wasn't bad even at the age of thirty.

"Hobby?" Sharon Hansen said, raising dark eyebrows and smirking. "Hobby? Hell, Pete, you've made women a life-long vocation."

"Every healthy man needs a hobby," Harriet said, smiling deeply into Hansen's eyes, offering herself unabashedly to him. At least, that's how it seemed to Fersting.

"What hobbies do *you* have, Morton?" Sharon asked.

Fersting thought, *She feels sorry for me*. "Hobbies," he replied vaguely. "Oh, none really. I play around with my projector, in my spare time." He looked at Pete, careful not to seem too anxious, keeping his tone casual. "I've got an interesting baseball program if you'd like to see it sometime."

Harriet snorted. "Surely, Pete's got better things to do than look at some old baseball program. They don't even play that game anymore."

But Pete Hansen looked curious. "Baseball? I didn't know you could buy a projection like that. The obsolete sports, I mean."

"I wrote it myself," Fersting replied modestly, with a shrug of his narrow shoulders. "It's nothing much. But I think it gives you the feel of what it must've been like. I've done some research in the history museum. Back in those days there was sunshine thirty, forty percent of the year —"

"Nobody's interested in that stuff," Harriet interrupted. Then she smirked at Pete Hansen. "You look like an athlete, Pete. Do you play snapper?"

Hansen grinned. His expensive tan looked almost real. "I was on the college team. I was the hurler."

"The hurler!" Harriet batted her eyes.

Hansen could take her away from me, Fersting thought, feeling depressed. Panic started. Harriet was all he had in the world. As bad as she'd become,

as terribly as she treated him, she was it. *Without Harriet* — he shuddered. It was difficult for him to contemplate such a thing.

Harriet and Hansen were gazing into each other's eyes like young lovers. Something would have to be done.

After the Hansens said good night and went out into the rain, Fersting headed for the kitchen to make tea. Harriet entered, sat at the table, and gazed at him with a slight scowl.

"You weren't exactly the life of the party tonight," she said.

"I thought Pete Hansen was the life of the party." He poured boiling water into his cup.

"Don't be sarcastic, Morton. It was a social affair. At least you could've been social."

"I thought you were social enough for both of us."

"Are you going to accuse me of flirting again?"

Fersting shrugged, stirring his tea. Then: "What about Pete's wife? Don't you care about *her* feelings?"

"Are you suggesting there's something going on between me and Pete? Because if you are, Morton, just come right out and say it. Of course, that would take guts, which you don't have."

"What about Bradley Deller? You fooled around with him. And what about Mark Woo? And J. L. Kooskowski, and Orson Demetrios?"

All four of them, Deller and Woo and Kooskowski and Demetrios, had been lovers of hers. After some time, each had stopped coming around, never to be seen again.

"What about them?" Harriet said, sounding disgusted, and left the room.

Fersting wondered if it had occurred to her to wonder where they had gone.

"It doesn't look like much," Pete Hansen said doubtfully, peering at the gray metal cylinder. "A baseball projection, huh?"

"It's so real you won't believe it," Fersting said.

It was early morning. Harriet had gone shopping with Sharon, leaving Fersting and Hansen to fend for themselves until lunch, when all four were to meet at Scrappi's for pasta and wine. Outside it was, as usual since 1999, raining. Fersting set up the projector at one end of the room and closed the windows. He pressed the activator button.

"Oh wow!" Pete Hansen exclaimed.

They stood, as had Fersting, just behind home plate. The umpire leaned forward as the pitcher released the ball. Fersting heard a solid plop as the hard sphere smacked into the catcher's mitt, knocking a cloud of dust from the leather. "Strike three!" the umpire bawled, jabbing into the air with his thumb. The batter glared briefly, then trudged towards the dugout.

"You're up next," Fersting said.

Hansen gaped, his clear blue eyes wide. "Me? Bat?"

"Sure. It's programmed for active participation."

"But . . ."

"Go ahead. They're waiting for you."

The crowd of fifty thousand spectators cheered as Hansen stepped up to the plate. Someone handed him a bat. He swung it a few times, then settled into his stance. The brilliant yellow sun played over his artificial tan, making him squint. Fersting smiled.

The pitcher wound and let fly a hard slider. Hansen had good reflexes, although anyone could hit the ball in this program. He connected squarely, sending a line drive into shallow left field, a base hit.

The sky was a huge blue dome. Someone was selling hotdogs and beer. Hansen went into first base standing up and stood there with one foot on the bag, grinning like a kid. He shouted down to Fersting: "Hey, Mort! This is great! Really *great!*"

I hope you enjoyed my wife, Fersting thought, and turned off the projector.

The baseball stadium disappeared. Now there was only the living room again. When he opened the windows, rain splattered against the plexiglas. The eternal rain, legacy of a limited nuclear exchange late in the previous century. The warm sunlit baseball game was gone, back inside the projector, bound up among a complex series of charged particles in the tape.

Fersting didn't understand the theory. But he understood the results.

He carried the projector to the cabinet and unlocked the doors. Setting the projector down on a shelf, he removed the baseball tape and placed it on top of the others piled there. Briefly, he gazed at them, recalling the names of the men forever trapped inside: Bradley Deller, Mark Woo, J. L. Kooskowski, Orson Demetrios.

And now, Pete Hansen.

Then he closed and locked the cabinet doors.

The living-room door opened suddenly, and Harriet stood, regarding him with narrowed eyes, an indication that she was up to something.

"Where's Pete?" she asked, with guilt in her voice.

Fersting smiled and said nothing.

"Sharon's gone to the hair stylist, and I promised her I'd come back here and keep Pete company while she finishes. I thought I'd run him downtown."

Fersting nodded. "I see."

"I asked you a question, Morton! Where's Pete?"

"He left," Fersting replied softly.

"I hate you," she said, and left as quickly as she'd come.

Fersting went out for dinner alone, feeling ill at ease. When he returned, he decided to check the projector. He brought out his key, then stopped and stared.

In his absence, the cabinet had been unlocked. Feeling panic building in his chest, he jerked the doors open and checked to see that the projector and tapes were still there. They were. But why had the cabinet been unlocked? It must have been Harriet. A peculiar feeling of fear made his spine tingle. What had she done?

He was alone in the house. If she'd returned, she'd gone out again. He thought about Pete Hansen and set up the projector, inserted the baseball tape, closed the windows, and switched on the projection machine. Instantly, the darkened room was replaced by the glaring expanse of ball park, the screaming of spectators, someone heckling the umpire, a kid hawking cold beer at the top of his lungs.

Nervously, Fersting kept his finger on the button, scanning the infield and outfield, searching for Hansen. His tall athletic figure was not visible.

What had Harriet done?

He stepped into the projection to look some more. Hansen had to be in here somewhere. Fersting's team was taking the field. He trotted down to first base, pulling the brim of his cap low over his eyes to shield them from the blinding sun as the first batter stepped to the plate. It was early innings, with the sun still high in the brilliant blue sky, no rain in sight.

This is life, Fersting thought. This is living.

But where was Hansen?

He squinted at the batter. On the mound the pitcher released a ball, low and inside. "Come on, baby," Fersting yelled. "You can get this guy out."

Behind the umpire, where the foul screen should have been, was the wall of Fersting's living room. As the strike slammed into the catcher's mitt, Fersting saw the living-room door open. He stared.

Harriet entered the room, followed by Pete Hansen. She must have found the tape, put it in the projector, run the program, and let Hansen out.

"Strike two!" the umpire bellowed, as another one caught the inside corner of the plate.

The crowd roared. The breeze was warm and comforting. The sun was hot on Fersting's face.

Harriet seemed to look at him. Even at this distance, he could read the hatred in her eyes. Then she reached out to touch the projector, and the little slice of living room behind the umpire winked out, replaced by the foul screen and rows of fans.

She's turned off the projector, Fersting realized. *My god, she's turned off the projector!*

He'd always wondered what it was like for someone in the game when the program stopped, what it was like for Harriet's lovers with their tapes stored on the cabinet shelf.


The only reality now was the baseball stadium, the smell of sunshine on real grass — something no one in this century had ever smelled. The next pitch was thrown.

A crack, as the bat connected to send a rocket straight at Fersting. He put up his glove instinctively, caught the line drive, and stepped on the bag. The crowd screamed its approval. Chills of delight rushed over Fersting's face and neck as he tipped his hat to the fans.

So this was it. Harriet had turned him off, and he was to live in this baseball program forever. Probably, she would store the tape on the shelf in the cabinet with the other tapes. Inadvertently, she had effected his escape from the post-war world of perpetual clouds, perpetual rain, cold, boredom, and a cheating wife. *Can't live without my Harriet*, he thought wryly, *unless I can live in the past, in the sunshine, in the baseball game.*

The inning was over. Time for Fersting's team to bat. This was living. This was life. *A good trade*, he decided. Harriet and her lovers for the smell of sunshine on grass, the crack of a bat, the heat of a summer's afternoon before the bombs. He stepped up to the plate, confident, ready. *My tape's on the shelf, he thought, and I'm coming to bat.*

Unless, he realized, she decided to get rid of the tape. Unless Harriet decided to toss it down the incinerator.

Panic again, and terror. On the mound, the pitcher looked in for the sign. The fans clapped. The hawkler cried, "Cold beer." And out in left field, down the line just past third base, something red crackled up through the turf and shot skyward. 

REINCARNATION

I've heard discussed by learned men
somehow we may come back again,
another life, another day,
not necessarily, they say,
as man, more like some other beast.
I do consider this at least
a rather good and unique scheme
to render punishment we'd deem
appropriate for various flaws
for those who've ignored nature's laws.
Let those who trophy hunting yearn
as great Bull Elephants return,
and all the bullies with their vice
come back to us as Timid Mice!

— Buck Allen

SCIENCE FICTION ON VIDEO: Classics of the Silent Era

by Matthew J. Costello

FILM ESSAY

It is one of the more remarkable moments on film.

It occurs well near the end of George Romero's *Day of the Dead*, the concluding film to his Dead trilogy that began with the ground-breaking *Night of the Living Dead*.

Up to this point the audience has been treated by an unrelenting assault of graphic violence and absolutely brutal language.

A small group of civilians, some scientists, and a ragtag squad of soldiers are attempting to keep the hordes of dead, activated by some interstellar intrusion into our atmosphere, at bay. Meanwhile, they are experimenting on "living" specimens to see what makes them so positively antisocial.

And the film, so far, has been hard to take. As the humans sink to lower and lower levels, their brutality to each other becomes almost too much to stomach.

And all the while the resident doctor — a rather soft-spoken mad-scientist type — is attempting to teach one of the "dead," to train it to take its nutrition in a more socially acceptable manner.

But let me hurry to my point. The doctor makes some progress with one of the shambling brutes. But then, in their fear and madness, the soldiers kill the doctor just as someone opens the gates to the waiting throng of dead.

The doctor's protégé breaks loose, stumbling through the hallways, past the laboratory, arriving, finally, at a

body. It pauses, a horrible moment of recognition as it sees the scientist, and it lets out a ghastly howl.

Of self-pity. Of pain. The most human sound that we have heard in the film so far. And that's the moment.

A moment when other pictures come to mind. And you remember another shuffling brute who came to represent a twisted view of humanity gone awry. Frankenstein's monster became, of course, a reflection of the fear and hate that surrounded it — even as it displayed its own vulnerability to a child, to a blind stranger.

But even further back, past James Whale's classic film, another image appears in a film called *Der Golem*. Another man-made being rendered vulnerable by very human feelings, feelings that ultimately destroy it.

Nearly 70 years after *Der Golem*, Romero's *Day of the Dead* — for all its shocking novelty and new-wave horror — is exploring a thematic vein first examined when movies flickered silently, accompanied by melodramatic organ music.

According to Phil Hardy's mammoth *Science Fiction, the Film Encyclopedia*, the first SF film was *Charcuterie Mécanique* (a.k.a. *The Mechanical Butcher*). This epic lasts all of one minute and is devoted to a depiction of a machine that transforms a live pig into link sausages.

That's it. A little short on plot but certainly fast moving.

By 1893, Georges Méliès began

making wildly fantastic science-fiction films with strange, funny images. These films, like *La Lune à un Metre* and *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) (where the rocket runs into the man in the moon's custardy left eye), were films with real SF stories and striking special effects. Space flight is depicted, aliens vanish in a puff of smoke, and classics of trick photography are used for the very first time, often to hilarious effect. In *Le Voyage à Travers l'Impossible* (1905), explorers board a combination railroad train, engine, automobile, airship, and submarine in a trip that takes them from the balmy surface of the sun to (this time) the moon's mouth.

The importance of Méliès's giddy work cannot be overestimated. "He taught me everything," D. W. Griffith said. And yet, a more serious art was not long in coming.

Not long at all . . .

This four-part series, "Science Fiction on Video," will trace the history and evolution of science-fiction films, the major themes, and the technological breakthroughs. It will be an illustrated survey of the SF classics, the cult favorites, and the weekend wonders of science fiction currently or soon to be available on videotape and laser disc.

The series will also include a video source book, listing where videotapes may be purchased or rented, including little-known sources such as Video Yesteryear and Sinister Cinema. A select bibliography will also be included, changing with each article as the series moves through the years.

And it starts with a genuine classic — a landmark film — Paul Wegener's *Der Golem*.

German film director Paul Wegener must have liked the legend of the

golem. It became his cinematic *idée fixe*. He acted the role three times and directed two versions of the story, first in 1914 and then again in 1920.

While such a fascination is uncommon today (when the attitude often seems to be "film it and forget it"), it's not too hard to understand the tremendous allure the story had for Wegener.

It's a heady mixture of demonology, mad science, a monster turning against its creator, and, to be sure, the power of innocence.

But more than that, it was a film that would set the pattern for literally hundreds of genre films to come. It's not surprising that Wegener returned to this material many times. Other, lesser hands would use chunks of its imagery to fuel countless stories.

Technically, *Der Golem* (Ufa, 1920, 118 min.) represents state-of-the-art filmmaking circa 1920. The photography was done by Karl Freund, who used the extreme contrasts of black and white to create an otherworldly air throughout the film.

Freund's camera work has a vibrancy and realism that are striking even today. Yet, his use of shadows cutting across scenes, jutting out onto sun-dappled streets, creates an ominous mood.

Freund's later work would do much to create the classic look of Universal's *The Mummy* (1932) and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932). Both films have the odd perspective and intense use of shadow and light that make *Der Golem* so riveting. And Freund's work clearly influenced the look of *Frankenstein* and countless other SF films of the '30s. While Freund would end his career filming episodes of *I Love Lucy*, he created a classic cinematographic style still used in genre films today.

Der Golem opens on a nighttime view of medieval Prague with its

sharply pointed roofs. Rabbi Loew, an astronomer, reads disaster in the stars, and his predictions come true when an edict is delivered to the ghetto. It describes how the Jews despise Christian ceremonies and thus practice black magic. They are, therefore, to be banished from the city.

The astronomer prepares to contact a descendant of the demon Astaroth to bring to life a massive clay creation, the golem. It is the golem, the rabbi hopes, that will save his people. The golem, dressed in a cutaway frock and sporting an oversized pageboy, looks more like a stern, well-stuffed burgher-master than a monster. But it foreshadowed and influenced James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931). The impassive, lifeless face, the clunky boots, and, when finally brought to life, the golem's stiff manner of walking (as if it were an uncomfortable act) became, of course, classic, then clichéd images.

As Rabbi Loew works to shape the golem, one can get an idea of how startling it must have been when an audience first heard sound coming from the screen. Here, in the silence, we watch more closely since everything is visual — there are simply no auditory clues to tie the story together.

Just as the rabbi finishes the golem, the emperor's representative, a foppish character named Florian, who strolls around dangling a flower, arrives with his boss's edict. Rabbi Loew pleads for his people, but Florian seems only interested in the rabbi's daughter, Miriam.

His back against the wall, Rabbi Loew carries the golem up to the attic (not an easy task). He stumbles upon his daughter and Florian in a huddle. "You shame me," he says to her. "But I'll soon have a guardian for you."

Later, in the attic, he explains to his assistant that the demon Astaroth can

be forced to reveal a word to make the golem come to life (if, of course, there's a favorable conjunction of the planets).

The summoning commences, and the demon appears — a very effective display with animated fireballs — and the rabbi is surrounded by a ring of fire. Astaroth appears from the mist, breathing smoke from a nosferatu-like head with elongated ears. It forms the word out of smoke, which is put into the Star of David in the golem's chest.

The golem's eyes open. He looks around with a grimace. And we also notice that he looks decidedly shorter now that he's alive (and played by Wegener).

Now we're treated to scenes of the golem chopping wood, watching over the daughter (who's less than thrilled), and learning how to move. Eventually, the golem hits the streets with what looks like a little wicker basket under his arm, off to do the day's marketing.

And of course, he's incredibly clumsy (another classic motif). But you have to wonder . . . if he's learned how to walk and get around, why does he act so rude, kicking things over as he comes into a shop to buy some dried fruits? (Incredibly enough, he's carrying a shopping list.)

The intentional dark humor of *Der Golem* would also influence many of the films of the '30s.

Finally, it's confrontation time, and Rabbi Loew brings the golem to the emperor's court. Everybody at court is dressed as if it were Act III of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, and the members of the court don't particularly like the stone-faced golem.

The golem is offered a flower by one of the young dancing girls — a scene that anticipates the young girl who picks flowers with Frankenstein's monster.

Then the rabbi has the golem cause the palace to begin to collapse, and the emperor begs, "Save me, and I will pardon your people." The joyous sound of the Shofa horn signals victory to the ghetto.

But the power of such a monster is not without a price. "You have brought the dead to life . . . beware of that life," the rabbi is warned. When Rabbi Loew tries to still the golem by removing the word, the golem attacks him. The Rabbi tries to destroy his creation, but is interrupted when he learns that Florian and Miriam have apparently been dallying (he's in his long johns and her hair is down, with pigtailed that almost touch the floor — a sure sign of licentious behavior). The golem is then unleashed against Florian.

Now we see something really remarkable.

The golem chases Florian to the top of a tower, bearing a torch, forcing Florian to tumble over the side — a situation identical to the end of *Frankenstein*, save for the fact it's the monster who's chased with flaming torches.

A fire starts (and it's real — no special effects here), and the golem is loose, taking the daughter with him. There are many striking shots of the golem moving through passageways, climbing down stairs, dragging the daughter behind him. He finally lets her drop, and then moves through the massive ghetto doors to the main city.

A little child sits watching, not running away. Just curious. She offers the golem a flower, and the golem picks up the child and holds her close. The child fingers the amulet, the Star of David, and then removes it. The golem freezes, and begins to totter until it finally falls to the ground.

And another motif — the power of

innocence — has been introduced.

The child looks nervously at the fallen golem, then calls the other children to gather around. They look at the golem, sit on it, poke at it, until the rabbi and his entourage return to find the fallen creature.

The golem is picked up and carried back to the ghetto, and the massive doors are shut. The final shot shows the ghetto walls and the Star of David superimposed upon it.

And there you have it. The story almost makes sense, doesn't it? And that's nothing to sneeze about, not when many science-fiction films of the era had plot lines that made comic strips seem erudite. Not only is it amazing that such a film could be made in Germany a mere thirteen years before the Third Reich, but the film is also a remarkable document on its own merits.

Paul Wegener, along with Ernst Lubitsch and F. W. Murnau, worked with Max Reinhardt, at the time the most important director and producer of the German stage. Reinhardt's work stressed striking realism, surrounded by architectural and costume spectacle. While Lubitsch would go on to create classic film comedies and Murnau would direct the definitive vampire film, *Nosferatu* (1922), Wegener took Reinhardt's methods and applied them to film. The result, as seen in *Der Golem*, influenced Hollywood's films for the next 20 years.

Phil Hardy in *Science Fiction, the Film Encyclopedia* describes it as "the first real example of a cinema in which acting, set design, photography and directing combine into an integral whole, signalling the beginning of a period no longer stage bound or relying almost exclusively on editing for its narrative and dramatic effects."

Wegener's theatrical work with Max

Reinhardt undoubtedly contributes to the film's visceral storytelling power. Leslie Halliwell, a not-easily pleased critic and author of *Halliwell's Film Guide*, mentions that "*Der Golem's* splendid sets, performances and certain scenes all clearly influenced later Hollywood films, especially *Frankenstein*."

Freund's virtuoso lighting created, according to Hardy, "a claustrophobic old Prague, and sets a style that would appear in countless films of the late '20s and early '30s."

While undoubtedly a gothic romance, *Der Golem* is one of the few silent films that has a script that, according to Kenneth Macgowan in *Behind the Screen*, "progresses clearly, logically, imaginatively."

And *Der Golem* also gives credibility to the sometimes outlandish theories of Rudolph Arnheim.

Arnheim, a German film critic who later fled Hitler's Germany, wrote a book called *Film as Art* — a classic work, often out of print, always in demand. He maintained that the limitations of the silent film were its virtues. Sound would not add anything — in fact, it would detract from the power of the visual image.

"From its very silence, film received the impetus as well as the power to achieve excellent artistic effects." He then gave an example of such a scene in a film. It takes place on the docks of New York. We see a revolver shot, and then the film cuts quickly to a flock of birds flying excitedly away. "The viewer actually sees something of the quality of the noise — the suddenness, the abruptness of the rising birds, gives visually the exact quality that the shot possesses acoustically."

Because of lack of sound, we watch more closely. Because of the lack of sound, the filmmaker must create the

image to render the quality of the noise. Our imaginations are engaged, much as they are in the artificial setting of the theater.

An outlandish idea? *Der Golem* makes ample use of its silence. Watching it, you are almost unaware that there is no sound. Effects, such as the destruction in the emperor's palace or the summoning of Astaroth, are so visually alive that we can imagine the sounds.

And more modern examples come to mind. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), while certainly not silent, relied on visual images for much of the time, without dialogue. Just think of the dawn of man sequence, the exploration of the moon crater Clavius, dismantling Hal, and, of course, the star-gate sequence.

More recently, ABC aired the overhyped and underappreciated *Amerika*, which presented long sequences without a word of dialogue, letting the visual images tell the story and carry the emotional freight.

Which they did wonderfully.

Der Golem's influence is obvious. But it also bears watching as one of the handful of genuine silent classics.

My son watched *The Lost World* (First National Pictures, 1925, 77 min.) with me while the film's organ soundtrack blasted away. And though other silent films left him bored and antsy, begging for anything, *anything* with sound, in color too, *please*, this picture kept him riveted.

And rightly so.

Ray Harryhausen, the stop-motion animation master responsible for films like *It Came from beneath the Sea* (1955), *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (1958), and *Mysterious Island* (1961), credits *The Lost World* with a big impact on his life. "I saw it when I

was about three or four," he told me, "and I remember it leaving a vivid impression."

Though directed by Harry Hoyt, *The Lost World* was Willis O'Brien's picture. O'Brien had made a number of shorts for the Edison Company, including *The Dinosaur and the Missing Link*, stretching the limits of stop-motion. But *The Lost World* was the first use of it in a feature, and despite its being a trial run for O'Brien's masterpiece, *King Kong* (1933), *The Lost World* stands up quite well as a masterful piece of filmmaking — and a tremendous influence on science-fiction films since.

Undoubtedly, Arthur Conan Doyle's story was fresher in 1925 than it is today. The film begins a bit lethargically with Professor Challenger (played by a surprisingly academic-looking Wallace Beery) outlining his plans to search for explorer Maple White, lost on some "terrible plateau." Initially, the contrivance of dialogue cards and the reaction shots seem funny, but the pace of the film is enough to move the story along.

A young journalist, eager for a scoop, offers to come — interested also, no doubt, in the beautiful Paula White, daughter of the explorer.

And, as should be obvious, we have the basic initial situation of *King Kong*. An exploring party, the young lovers, an unknown land. And the similarities only grow.

After a rowdy scene of Challenger's colleagues laughing scornfully at his mad idea of a "lost world," the party, also accompanied by millionaire John Rockston, sets out.

More of the shots, especially leading to the plateau, are striking. The group's canoe moves upriver, and we glimpse a native standing in a steamy jungle, thick with underbrush. A snake

dangles nearby, hanging down from a branch. Monkeys scurry about, and a jaguar looks on hungrily. All this realism prepares us to accept the fantastic images to come.

Arriving at the plateau, Challenger discovers that it's almost unreachable. (We think, immediately, of Kong's wall.) The only approach is from a nearby rock formation. It's here that we first see O'Brien's stop-motion technique: a pteradactyl, fairly convincing if a bit jerky in its flying. As in all the animation, none of it has the smooth fluidity of *King Kong*. But still we can imagine that, in 1925, this flying dinosaur was something to see.

Challenger leads the group up the nearby rock tower, and a tree bridge is made to climb over to the plateau (again a motif to be used in *King Kong*). We then get an incredible dinosaur festival. A brontosaurus grazes on some swamp grass. A crisply detailed allosaurus, again with a slightly jerky walk, comes into view, described as "the most vicious pest of the ancient world" by Professor Challenger. And, in one of the few instances of baby dinosaurs used in films, a whole family of triceratops is menaced by the allosaurus, who finally goes after the pteradactyl — apparently an easier prey.

The party soon finds the missing Maple White's watch, and realizing he's dead, the members attempt to leave. But the tree bridge is knocked down by scuffling dinosaurs (in this case a sneering brontosaurus and an allosaurus). A volcano begins to act up, letting the audience know that the explorers don't have much time to get off the plateau.

A rope ladder is hastily improvised, and as they escape, one of the local ape men (the result of a remarkable 4½-hour make-up job) begins to haul

them up, just as Kong would do to Fay Wray and Bruce Cabot as they try to escape his lair.

They come across the defeated brontosaurus stuck in the mud below, and Rockston, the entrepreneur, says he'll give his entire personal fortune (this was, after all, before the 1929 Crash) to "get that beast back to London alive."

There's an immediate cut to a scene of fashionable London circa 1925 streaming into the theater to see the captured brontosaur. And now we have the granddaddy of all the escaped-monster films that were to come in the '50s. The brontosaur breaks out of its cage and escapes, running wild in the streets of London. Past streets filled with old Fords and screaming people, the brontosaur ambles toward the Tower Bridge.

It escapes into the water (apparently able to swim back to its world) while

the young lovers head off in a cab and Rockston looks on pensively.

And there you have it. A blueprint for one of the greatest SF/fantasy films of all time: *King Kong*. Missing, of course, the old boy himself.

Despite that, *The Lost World* stands on its own. Some of the shots are absolutely remarkable. There are scenes of whole herds of dinosaurs, grazing like cattle, and these are complex shots that were not attempted in O'Brien's later work. With baby dinosaurs and a lush jungle teeming with life, this is a more complete prehistoric world than Kong's Skull Island.

Watching *The Lost World*, I found it to have a giddy exuberance that made it very special. O'Brien appears willing to let the prehistoric creatures dominate the film (which they do). While *King Kong* was to be a somber, dark-hued film, *The Lost World* revels in the magical technology of stop-motion



Scene from "The Lost World"

animation.

Even *Daily Variety* (in 1925) said, "Without a doubt an unusual and interesting picture." Big box office was (accurately) predicted. But *Variety's* reviewer went on to say, "There is a shot in the picture that shows Bessie Love beside a lighted candle in a cave which is as fine a piece of photographic art as has been seen in a long while."

The impact of *The Lost World* can't be overemphasized. Merriam C. Cooper, who would, with O'Brien, create *King Kong*, called O'Brien, "a true genius. He could sketch animals, particularly prehistoric animals, better than any man who ever lived." Ray Harryhausen, who had worked with O'Brien on *Mighty Joe Young* (1949), told me that "O'Brien was the first to realize the theatrical importance of making animated figures and moving them through the stop-motion process. He was a great influence on my sense of fantasy."

Stop-motion animation would come to dominate many science-fiction and horror films. O'Brien himself went on to *Son of Kong* (1933) and *Mighty Joe Young* — both more whimsical exercises than *King Kong*. And Ray Harryhausen created the giant octopus from *It Came from beneath the Sea* and the dinosaur from *The Beast from Twenty Thousand Fathoms*, both classic images of the '50s.

But there's a story that the special-effects people at Lucasfilms, Ltd., invited Ray Harryhausen to screen some of the stop-motion effects in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). They had invented something called "go-motion," which used a slight blurring effect created by the figure's movement to render the animation more natural.

Harryhausen was visibly impressed.

Here was a genuine advance on the stop-motion process, pioneered 50 years ago by Willis O'Brien.

Besides stop-motion, *The Lost World* also features the first use of back projection. If you watch, you can see the matte line, indicating the projection above and the actors below. And, it was the first in-flight movie, shown during Imperial Airlines' flight from London to the continent in April 1925. Considering airplane acoustics at the time, it's probably a good thing that it was a silent film.

And not only did the film introduce a technique (stop-motion animation), but it introduced themes. The lost world. The oversized monster escapes and rampages. The shift of sympathy from the human "horde" to the imprisoned animal.

Finally, here's Harlan Ellison on O'Brien, Cooper, Howard Hawks, and a handful of other filmmakers. They were "men who worked within a restrictive system, with budgets that wouldn't have paid for one patch of *Tron's* computer graphics or a side street in the world of *Blade Runner*, but who could not be contained by the comical plots they put on celluloid, who transcended petty considerations and fleshed out immortal fantasies for generations to come."

And he's certainly right about that generation stuff. My son loved *The Lost World*, even with all that tub-thumping organ music and goofy dialogue cards.

And to do that, in this day and age, is no mean feat.

I didn't want to write about *Metropolis*.

No, Fritz Lang's 1926 masterpiece was going to get a bye from me.

For a couple of well-considered reasons.

First, it's perhaps better known than it has a right to be. It's a veritable touchstone of the silent era, the first SF "masterwork" and "a great work by a great director."

At which point the discussion could easily segue into a consideration of Lang's *Metropolis* (Ufa, orig. 1926, approx. 107 min.) with a brilliant and young Peter Lorre or the entire German expatriate filmmaking scene.

And besides, what other SF film has had a big commercial re-release in this day of super special effects and Dolby Sensurround (that almost masks the full throttle chatter of the audience).

Yes, *Metropolis* was cut drastically and released in 1984 with a high-tech score created by soundtrack wunder-kind Giorgio Moroder.

Must be some picture, eh?

And it is. . . . Yet I find it oddly unsatisfactory, a one-of-a-kind film that remains in a class by itself. Great images, some powerful scenes, but, er, well, at times more than a bit boring and preachy.

But there's no way to talk about Lang's other big SF silent film, *Die Frau im Mond* (*The Woman in the Moon*), which remains largely unknown, without at least an abbreviated look at *Metropolis*.

Frederik Pohl described *Metropolis* as the first "big budget, fully aware SF film." The budget, supposedly near \$2 million (though *Variety* called that figure "bologna"), was certainly big. With a cast of 36,000, the film made no bones about unleashing a massive glimpse at an unappealing mechanized future.

Lang also used massive amounts of film stock to record his vision, 1,960,000 feet that were eventually cut to a mere 13,165 — an incredible ratio of 149 to 1 for usable footage. In 1926, *Variety* described the film as "a weird

story, visionary all the time, without any degree of unusual imagination and oftentimes monotonous."

The story is basically a tale of drone-like workers being exhorted by a daughter of the wealthy to rebel against the heartless capitalists who keep them imprisoned in tremendous subterranean factories. The images — the robotrix created by a prototypical mad scientist, gigantic machines being operated, and the flooding of the workers' quarters — are genuinely impressive. But the story fails to engage our emotions.

Metropolis is sporadically interesting to look at. Certain scenes, as photographed by Karl Freund, are stupendous. But all the realism and atmosphere of this mammoth world of the future is lost on a dumb idea and one-dimensional characters.

H. G. Wells called it "quite the silliest film," while filmmaker Luis Bunel said it's "two films glued together by their bellies."

The weak link in the film is the script, co-written by Lang's wife, Thea von Harbou. Lang's story of the struggle to enlighten the troglodyte masses depends on human beings, and the characters are just too sketchily drawn to make it all work.

As they are in Lang's other SF silent film, *Die Frau im Mond*. But in this case, it just doesn't matter.

Released in 1929, *The Woman in the Moon* (Ufa, 185 min.), as it was called in the U.S., often appears to be years ahead of itself. The story is also inoffensively silly. But for long stretches, there is no doubt that you're watching the first real space-travel film.

"For 30 years Professor Manveld has been an authority on astronomy," a dialogue card informs us, and for 30 years the old coot has tried to send an expedition to the moon to prospect for

gold. Despite scenes of his fellow scientists laughing uproariously (and blowing whistles) at his statement that “the day will come when a manned rocket will fly to the moon,” a wealthy entrepreneur (apparently a stock figure in the roaring ’20s films) comes forward to finance the professor’s expedition. An expedition party is formed of the professor, the entrepreneur (named Helius), a scientist named Hans, and his wife Friede, an old flame of Helius. The acting is subtle, realistic — not surprising since sound films were just around the corner.

The rocket is prepared, a multistage vehicle with fins, resembling an oversized V-2. We see an animated graphic of the moon trip, including the orbits of the earth and the moon, and the trajectory of the rocket.

And it starts to become clear that the film has a sophistication that’s decades ahead of where it should be. It seems, at times, more of a 1957 film than one of 1925.

The party prepares for the launch, joined by a sleazy guy from the finance group eager to be among the first to get his hands on the moon’s gold.

The entire launch sequence is magnificent, destined to influence dozens of films to come.

An airplane skywrites S-T-A-R-T above the launch pad. Lang has the camera shooting down for an aerial shot, panning slowly, impressively. And audiences in the grandstands hold balloons, while an announcer reports on the progress of the launch. (And again, no sound is needed here.)

The explorers get into the rocket by climbing (rather improbably) a rope ladder. There’s a remarkably prescient montage of cameramen and newspaper reporters swarming around taking pictures, foreshadowing the media circus that NASA would become.

Finally, the primitive gantry backs away from the rocket, slowly, suspensefully. This remarkable pace, the realistic, prolonged sequence of events here, can only bring to mind Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. At sunrise, the tremendously large building housing the rocket opens up, and the people cheer and wave.

And here the editing surpasses anything seen in any other SF film of the era. It’s modern and crisp, with tremendous angles, looking down at the launch area, emphasizing its size.

Lang continues to take his time with the sequence. Twin search lights play across the rocket casting two elongated shadows that move slowly apart. A single long shot emphasizes the massive scale of the base — a scene the likes we wouldn’t see again until Cape Canaveral was operating in full gear.

Finally, as the rocket is lowered into a water basin (to supposedly protect the delicate material of the ship during launch), the countdown begins — an invention of the film that became mandatory in any space-travel film to come after it.

The launch itself is slightly disappointing, as the rocket zooms too quickly into space. But hell, we’re only three years from Goddard’s first toy rocket launch.

Of course, inside the rocket it looks like the IRT subway, with straps hanging down, even if the dauntless explorers do give some lip service to the G forces of the accelerating rocket.

From here on, *The Woman in the Moon* concerns itself with the love triangle, landing on the moon, and the search for the gold. There are neatly done shots of liquid escaping on the ship and the bubbles floating around in zero gravity, and the moon’s surface rushing toward them.

Once on the moon (which has a

highly breathable atmosphere), the story becomes melodramatic, with the climax revealing that someone must stay behind due to a loss of oxygen. Helius dopes the white wine of Friede and Hans — in an act of self-sacrifice he arranges to stay behind — and the rocket returns to earth.

Imagine his surprise then, when Friede steps out from behind a rock. Apparently, she didn't drink the wine, we learn, and she will be able to set up house on the inhospitable moon surface with the man she really loves.

And the audience learns why it's called *The Woman in the Moon*.

For me, the remarkable thing about *Die Frau im Mond* is that much of its influence, in style and story, wouldn't be seen again until after World War II. SF films of the '30s and '40s were often earthbound and preoccupied with the next war, or goofy space operas featuring swords, ice planets, and sputtering spaceships that you can hear in a vacuum. It's fascinating to watch *Die Frau im Mond* and realize how long ago it was made . . . knowing that not until *Destination Moon* (1950) would we see its like again.

Variety's critic didn't care for *Die Frau im Mond* when it opened, calling it a "mechanical oddity, but that's all." The critic went on to fault Lang's wife, Thea von Harbou, who he said, "has not created any characters which interest us."

True enough.

But neither did Stanley Kubrick. Because *2001: A Space Odyssey* was about space, and, perhaps, mankind's loss of its soul. And just maybe we see that loss beginning in *The Woman in the Moon*. Not that the characters aren't trying to act human. No, they lie, cheat and kill, love and sacrifice. But the enormity, the scale of the pace dwarfs, almost ridicules their activi-

ties. Humans, as the assorted Apollo crews demonstrated, don't play the grand stage of space with the appropriate sense of grandeur.

The film used two well-known experts, Willy Ley, who later escaped to the United States, and Hermann Oberth, who worked for the Nazis and later on George Pal's film *Destination Moon*.

Ley later wrote an imagined history of space flight, *Conquest of Space*, and he provided technical background for *Destination Moon* — the same role he served for Fritz Lang on *Die Frau im Mond*.

The film also made some people a bit nervous. "It scared members of the British Foreign Office witless," Phil Hardy said, "and caused the Nazis to withdraw the film from distribution while the Gestapo destroyed the spaceship model used in the film in order to keep their development of the V-1 and V-2 rockets an absolute secret."

Lang may ultimately have moved on to murky Hollywood thrillers toward the end of his career, but these two films, especially *The Woman in the Moon*, would clearly influence science-fiction films from every era to come. From the measured pace and attempted scientific realism of *Transatlantic Tunnel* and *Things to Come* of the '30s, to the docudrama approach of *Rocketship X-Man* and *Riders to the Stars* of the '50s, and finally culminating in a masterpiece, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The Woman in the Moon changed SF films forever.

Gone were the funny gags at the expense of realism. Gone was the jerky, let's-get-this-movie-rolling pace that said to hell with realism. And gone was science fiction being presented merely as a magical fable.

Instead, there was a stately, almost reverential devotion to technical activi-

ty and an unbelievable tolerance for the stately, slow movement of very large objects.

Lang, with the help of special-effects wizard Oskar Fischinger (who later would work for Walt Disney on *Fantasia*), used miniatures and sharply angled lighting, coupled with an uncommon attention to detail. When Lang's camera pans up to look at the rocket, we have no doubt of its size. Perhaps for the first time a filmmaker made us believe totally in a rocket while it was on the ground. And it was an easy next step to believe in it as it soars off to the moon.

An event in history only a mere 40 years away.

Of course, there were the ones that got away. The marvelous *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1916), which featured incredible underwater photography. And *Mysterious Island* (1929) with Lionel Barrymore portraying Nemo in a film that had both sound and color segments. While both films are available as expensive 16-millimeter rental items, they're not, as yet, available in videotape.

There are a number of good sources for videotape copies of these, and other, silent films. Video Yesteryear is a marvelous company specializing in unusual films on video, from Mack Sennet comedies to the lurid Flash Gordon serials. Their silent features are recorded with a flickerless recording system so that a silent film (designed to run at 18 frames per second) appears natural. Also, all the silent films feature an original score played by Rosa Rio. A catalog is available by writing to: Video Yesteryear, Box C, Sandy Hook CT 06482.

Other good sources for older, hard-to-find material are Rex Miller Supermantiques. Miller specializes in

collector-to-collector sales of rare films. To contact him write: Rex Miller, Route 1, Box 457-D, East Prairie MO 63845.

Eddie Brant's Saturday Matinee caters to Hollywood stars eager to find an old film and to video collectors from around the world: Eddie Brant's Saturday Matinee, 6310 Colfax Avenue, North Hollywood CA 91606.

Two primary source books for any era are Phil Hardy's *Science Fiction, the Film Encyclopedia* and *Encyclopedia of Horror Movies* (William Morrow and Company, Inc.). The coverage of all SF films is, well, encyclopedic but also loaded with fascinating information and great stills.

Leonard Maltin's *The Whole Film Source Book* (New American Library) is excellent for locating libraries, film schools, and just about anyone who has anything to do with films. I used it to track down the 1916 version of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* from a defunct studio in Queens to its present availability.

Film as Art (University of California Press) by Rudolph Arnheim is not a book to curl up with, but it does contain just about the best film-theory material you're likely to read.

Variety's Complete Science Fiction Reviews (Garland Publishing, Inc.) is absolutely boffo! *Variety's* movie mavens hold forth on the genre films from 1907 to 1983. And, they're usually on target.

Behind the Screen (Dell Publishing) by Kenneth Macgowan has a readable history of the beginning of filmmaking in the silent era.

And lastly *The Guinness Book of Movie Facts and Feats* (Sterling Publishing) is great for who did what first, the fastest, or the most extravagantly.

GAEA DENTATA

In the millennial decay
of a worldwide alien arcology
known in the lingua franca

of the spaceways as Necropolis,
Gaea has become a mechanical
construct of neoprene and metal

who stalks crepuscular corridors
in search of the deleted creators
who have left her to the designs

of her own steely consciousness.
Clacking through the dusty maze
of her bihemispheric metropolis

with spectral receptors whirring,
slender titanium legs scissoring,
a high coiffure of electric claws,

she moves at a metamaniacal pace:
she catalogues archaic emptiness
in the blank facades and hours

of her nearly eventless horizon.
In the flaming hub of her chest
the lives of rare earths expire,

the functions and relays are set
for elemental energy catharsis.
In her halls of transmutation

she seduces wandering spacers,
her teeth and nails sharpened
like a devouring mother goddess.

— Bruce Boston

THE BRINGING OF MIRIAM

by Joel Henry Sherman

art: Paul Jaquays

The author resides in Bakersfield, California, where he is employed by the state as a civil servant. He and his wife, Carolyn, have been married for seven years.

His interest in writing began in high school, when he stumbled across several old Famous Writers School texts in his father's closet. His first novel, Corpseman, was purchased by Del Rey and is scheduled for release in 1988. His last appearance in Amazing® Stories was "Offerings at Medusa" (May 1985).

Konrad McKillough loved a woman dead four hundred years. Some of his lieutenants thought it insanity, the first sign of weakness in the old lion, but most kept such thoughts private and spent their time consolidating their position for succession. Any whose mouths worked before their brains had short chats with Abe Yerzy. In the McKillough organization, freedom of speech had a brutal price. The lion might have lost his mind, but his power was undiminished.

Sunlight spilled through leaded-glass windows and formed diamonds upon the tiled floor. The android on the lounge had not moved for an hour, her face held high to catch the light and one arm extended as if beckoning. Konrad let the emotions build within him, a chaos of love and yearning which he focused in his hands as he roughed her form onto the canvas with sharp strokes of charcoal. His wheelchair was wedged between the legs of the easel. He ignored the entrance of a second biobot.

"Mr. Yerzy is here, sir." The machine was of medium height, with green eyes and auburn hair. Her skin was pale. A double occupied the couch. A third replica, limping slightly, brought an iced pitcher into the room.

"Thank you, Lissa," he said softly. His face was a mask of concentration. "Show him in." He blew away the excess carbon.

Abe Yerzy was a stout, compact man. His bald skull merged with his shoulders, neck slightly thicker than his head. Gray coveralls stretched across his barrel chest, arms threatening to burst the sleeve. A fist had flattened his nose at an angle to his round face.

"Morning, Mr. McKillough." His rumbling voice was nearly unintelligible.

"Well?" Konrad spun his chair.

Yerzy nodded. "It can be done. Won't be easy. No volunteers."

"Use whatever it takes, money or force." He turned back to the portrait



and began sketching in the outlines of a mass of auburn ringlets. "Start with money. Arrange an appointment. Tonight. Pick the team you think most accessible."

"Yes, sir." Yerzy nodded.

McKillough dismissed him with a wave of his hand. For a long time after Yerzy was gone, the excitement was too intense for him to move. Soon, my love, he thought fervently. Soon we will be together.

They came at dusk in a beaten hovercraft which wheezed up the brick drive. There were three of them: two men and a woman. Angel escorted them into the study, her limp forcing her to use the wall for support. Konrad sat with his back to the fireplace. The portrait of Miriam towered over him, her face mirrored by the androids.

"So good of you to come," he said easily. "I'm Konrad McKillough."

"I'm Burke." The younger man spoke. His head was clean-shaven, and his eyebrows formed two dark lines above his blue eyes. His smile was awkward and engaging. The loose fabric of his shirt could not conceal his sculptured torso. Tight jeans hugged his legs. His knee-length boots gleamed of aged leather. He looked more like a pop star than a man who bent time to his will.

"He's Anst," the man continued. "She's Reyma. Your man said something about a job?"

"You available?"

"Depends." The one called Anst sat. He was a man of indeterminate age. His hair was brown and streaked with gray. A tangled beard hid the lower portion of his face. A scar crossed from temple to cheek and was lost in the whiskers. He watched Konrad with suspicious eyes.

"I can be most generous." Konrad left the amount unsaid, but he saw the interest in all their faces. Once time had offered the chance for untold wealth, but government regulation had transformed it into backbreaking labor, hours of boredom planning and proposing a jump with strict limits set on returns and imports. The patina of adventure still called some, but most left disappointed. He dangled the thought of a heavy fee like a baited hook and smiled as they tried to ignore it.

"It's not the money." Burke leaned back in the chair and folded his stout arms. "There are laws. We like to look at the whole jump first. Where, when, and why?"

"London, A.D. 1750. I understand it's a specialty period of yours." He took an iced glass from the biobot and drank deeply. "Will that be difficult?"

"Shouldn't be." Reyma shook her head. At least two meters in height, her figure was fashionably starved and accented by thin, graceful limbs. Shoulder-length hair partially obscured her narrow face. Cosmetic tattoos decorated her cheeks. "Provided we haven't been there before."

"Then we can reach an agreement?"

"Maybe." Burke shrugged. "What are we retrieving?"

Konrad drew a breath and drained it through his nostrils. He set his glass down cautiously and watched the trio until the silence grew uncomfortable. "A woman."

"Damn." Anst rose from the couch. "Let's go," he said, extending his hand to Reyma. "You can't transport Ancients. We'd lose our licenses. not to mention jail."

"Only if you're caught."

Anst ran a gnarled hand through his beard. "Can't hide something like that. Every jump is monitored. Mass checks, vid-recordings, all manner of inspections. You can't evade the systems."

"Every system has its weaknesses." His eyes smiled. "I've made a fortune, beating the odds. I'll make it worth the risk." Konrad pointed toward the portrait. "She's no one important. Her line ended with her early death. There's no chance of a paradox."

Reyma glanced from the painting to Angel. "Isn't she?"

"No," McKillough said, smiling bitterly. "A biobot, excellent workmanship, but nothing more than a toy. I've a dozen of them, but it's not the same."

"Who was she?"

"Lady Miriam Ashford." He shook his head, seemingly reading her mind. "Don't ask for explanations. I haven't any. Ever since I first saw the portrait, I had to have her." Konrad lowered his gaze to Reyma, as if they were sharing a secret. "You must know what love is like."

"We can't," Burke insisted.

"She died in Bethlehem Hospital during May of 1750." He ignored Burke and concentrated his pleas on the woman.

"Bedlam was a mental hospital. She'd be insane."

"I could have her mind taped."

"Then Miriam would be the same as your biobots. Just a programmed body."

"But I'd know she was Miriam."

"Sorry," Burke said.

"What if the woman were Reyma?" With grim satisfaction, he saw the protective veil pass over the faces of the two men.

"Not Reyma, though." Anst helped the woman from her seat.

Konrad's visage darkened. "You'll think it over, won't you?"

"Nothing to think about." Burke stood beside Reyma. "Good night, Mr. McKillough."

As a unit, the trio left the room, their footsteps echoing through the house. A moment later, the clattering engine of the hover grumbled to life. The yellow glow from the head lights faded into the twin lines of darkened junipers shadowing the drive.

Konrad sat motionlessly for a minute, a throbbing vein on his mottled temple betraying his anger. He spun his chair to face Abe Yerzy as the man stepped out of the next room.

"I need some leverage," he snapped.

Yerzy nodded and exited in silence.

A light breakfast of coffee and rolls was served on the terrace. The mirrored surface of the sea reflected a few clouds and wheeling flocks of gulls. Konrad inhaled the fragrance of the ocean, smiling at the bitter tang of real coffee. Lissa waited with the steaming pot. Angel limped back toward the kitchen for more cream.

"A fine morning," he said to his guest. "Isn't it?"

Reyma watched him dourly, her meal untouched. A purple bruise closed her left eye. Her lip was swollen.

"You weren't to have been harmed," he said quietly. "It was unfortunate. If you'd only accepted my offer, this could have been avoided."

She did not answer.

"If they cooperate, you'll be home soon."

Two men paced the rooftop. Sunlight glinted from their weapons. A third stalked the grounds near the cliff edge. There were more around front. A subtle display of Konrad's power.

"They have to cooperate. They know how vulnerable you are."

Her tears came slowly and silently.

"If you can't understand, you've never wanted anything bad enough." Konrad rolled away from the table, chair squealing softly as he headed toward the house.

The pub was one of his city properties. A front of ruddy brick opened on a split-level of wood and brass. The air was rich with the scents of smoke and leather. Candles cast a gentle phosphorescence in the room. Conversation and the clink of glasses droned pleasantly.

Konrad halted on the landing. Angel and Lissa walked before him. Two bodyguards lifted his chair on either side and carried him down the steps. Angel staggered, overcompensating for her limp. She teetered drunkenly before collapsing down the staircase, arms spread as if to fly, voice strangely silent. Her head slammed into the banister and then struck the edge of a table, the weight of her body scattering furniture. Wood and glass splintered. The house fell quiet.

"Damn," Konrad swore. He glared at the silent patrons, suddenly flushed and feeling their stares. "What the hell are you looking at?"

Pimps and prostitutes turned away. The bartender nodded and motioned for two boys to clean up the debris. Angel rose to her knees. The corner of the table had shorn away a triangular portion of the left side of her face, exposing metal and plastic beneath the skin. The roots of her teeth gleamed

against rubbery gums. Extending from eyelid to lower jaw, the tear revealed the clear glass of her eyeball. Her smile was twisted.

"Get rid of her," he said, turning away. Her smashed features sickened him.

"How?" The bodyguard shrugged uncertainly.

"Get her away from me!" Konrad shouted, his voice shrill.

"Sure." The man grabbed her arm and levered Angel to her feet. The android did not resist. She struggled up the staircase and out the door, leg clicking with every step. The pub returned to normal as Konrad wheeled to the booth where Burke and Anst waited.

"Hello, gentlemen."

"You bastard," Burke hissed, clenching his fists.

"No, Colin." Anst grabbed his shoulder. "Think of Reyma."

"Yes," said Konrad. "She's the key. Understand my motives now?"

"Yeah." Anst nodded. "Is she okay?"

"Naturally." The old man folded his hands. "Do what I ask, and she'll be returned to you."

"We'll need money."

"I'm paying for your services." McKillough laughed softly. He reached into his coat and withdrew a credit chip. "How much?"

"One hundred thousand credits." The purple rope of Anst's scar twitched.

"I'll give you fifty thousand now. The balance upon completion." Konrad waved to the bartender for a transfer unit, slid the card into the slot when it arrived, and keyed the monetary exchange. He took an envelope from Lissa and handed it to Anst. "Reyma has compiled your coordinates."

Anst fingered the papers. "We'll need some time."

"You have one week."

Burke shook his head. "Not enough."

"It'll have to do. Use some of that money to arrange for video reception. I want to watch. Anything else?"

"No."

"Then I suggest you get started."

Burke rose from the table, his face white, lips trembling with anger. Anst leaned close. A switchblade materialized in his hand, blade shining. A pearl dragon coiled on the ebony grips. The bodyguards lurched forward, hands grabbing for their weapons. Anst ignored them, his face intent and his eyes cold.

"Not now," the man said, holding the blade upright. "But when this is over." Light glittered on the chromium steel. He closed the knife against his leg as he backed away from the table.

Leaving the bar, Konrad saw Angel among the trash cans in the alley. The android was seated, back against the wall, can overturned on her lap. Her eyes blinked in a spastic rhythm. He was glad when the limo turned a corner

and she was lost from view.

Sunlight gilded the studio. Konrad painted with measured care, daubing greens and browns onto the coarse fabric to weave a pattern of interlaced trees and limbs. A knock at the door made him scowl.

"Come in." Setting aside his pallet, he swiveled the chair. Abe Yerzy paused in the doorway.

"They've ducked surveillance."

Konrad stared out the window, rubbing his narrow chin. "Bring everyone back to watch the woman."

"Already done."

"Good. Shave her head. Send the hair in a box to their business address."

"Any message?"

Konrad retrieved his pallet. "No need. I think it'll speak most eloquently alone." Returning to the landscape, he ignored Yerzy until the man departed, but the painting lacked focus. Dim and distant needles of fear upset his internal vision. Tension killed his mood.

When there was no response from the men on Monday, Konrad instructed Yerzy to send another package containing her fingernails.

Her front teeth were posted on Tuesday.

Infuriated by their stubbornness, he had Reyma's left ear mailed to them on Wednesday. Yerzy stationed additional guards at the doors and windows of his bedroom that night. Konrad slept poorly despite them.

In the morning a messenger delivered a single video cube. He retired to the theater for a private showing.

The holo-projector hissed. A spark of light flashed in the room, resolving into focus. Colin Burke's face appeared, horribly enlarged and features distorted.

"Okay, McKillough." His voice rasped from the speakers. He smiled as he pulled away from the camera. "Here's your film. We'll be in touch."

His costume was flawless. A three-cornered hat perched on his head. The white curls of a powdered wig cascaded to his shoulders. Knotted lace hung across the collar of his tan waistcoat. Knee-length breeches revealed white hose. He carried an ornate walking stick in one hand.

"Let's move." Anst's voice drifted from somewhere, and when the picture shifted position, Konrad realized the man was wearing the camera on his person.

They were in the center of a field of grass and trees. To the right was a street dotted with heavy traffic of carts and coaches. Ahead, a square brick structure rose in the morning mists.

Burke walked into the street, Anst following, the holo swaying with his steps. They stopped outside the brick wall which surrounded the hospital. The building was two stories and divided into separate wings. A balustrade

of white stone edged the flat roof, encircling a turret in the center. Pilasters and stone foliage adorned the walls, streaked with smoke and age. A gap-toothed guard at the wrought-iron gates allowed them entrance for two shillings.

The garden was a maze of stone walks and sprawling lawns. Shrubs and trees grew full and ragged. A few couples strolled in the morning sun. Faces leered from the windows. A drift of melody waxed and waned uncertainly.

They searched both wards of the hospital, curable and incurable. Most inmates were chained, wrapped in tattered rags and sitting in filthy straw mats. They passed a procession of slack faces, empty eyes. A man threatened them with death at the claws of his army of eagles, looking expectantly to the windows as though seeing the glint of sun on outstretched wings and hearing the screech of hunting falcons. Another man held court on the stairs. He babbled incessantly about the merits of bread and cheese, cheese and bread, ambrosia and nectar, ignoring them as they passed.

Knots of gentry viewed the inmates with aloof curiosity. Coarse groups of men and women prodded and goaded the idiots, laughing at their antics. Sometimes, it was impossible to tell the difference between them. Burke avoided the crowds.

In one of the chambers at the far end of the wing, a red-haired woman crouched fearfully.

"Miriam," Konrad gasped as the camera focused.

"That's the one," Anst said.

"Miriam?" Burke spoke soothingly as he approached. "Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you."

The woman cowered. Her eyes were enormous and green under her tangled hair. Her skin was gray with dirt. A moan escaped her lips, echoing in the room. As Burke stooped and extended his hand, she launched herself on them, looming up into the camera until she overshadowed all and the video became white static.

"Fix it!" Konrad barked at the android. "Immediately."

Lissa worked at the projector for a moment. "There is no more film."

"Damn them." He pounded the arm of his chair. "Damn them both. Play it over. There may be something more, something we missed."

The projector played long into the night.

During the afternoon of the following day, a messenger brought a package. McKillough sent a biobot outside to open it, but there was no bomb. There was only a thick rope of red hair tied with a ribbon.

He spent the afternoon on the terrace, his eyes turned out to sea, and the auburn locks clenched tightly in his hands.

The contact came late in the evening.

"Did you get the package?" Anst was huge on the projector. His expression was grim, no pleasure in his face.

"Yes." Konrad grimaced. "When can we make an exchange?"

"Tomorrow at dusk."

"I'll need to see her alive first."

"She's here. We want to see Reyma."

"Of course." Konrad hissed instructions to Lissa, sending the biobot scrambling.

The two men were momentarily silent. Hatred painted Anst's features. Lissa returned with the hostage and placed her before the projector.

"Tobe?"

"Hi, lady." His expression softened. "You okay?"

Reyma gave him a toothless grin. "I've been better."

"We'll get you out. Be patient."

Burke entered the transmission field pushing a wheeled table. Miriam lay on her back, right side toward the camera. Light etched her profile. Her scalp was translucently white, face pale. Her breathing was slow and regular.

"She's been doped for control," Burke said. "But she's sound."

"Good. Where shall we meet?"

"The beach below your house. Take a portable phone. Empty your place," Anst said, his eyes darkening. "Any surprises, and she's dead. After Reyma's safely away, Miriam will be left in the house. We'll call when we are clear. Don't leave the beach until we signal. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Good." Anst dissolved from the screen.

Abe Yerzy waited silently for orders.

"Damn." McKillough chewed his lips. "We can't risk anything."

"Snipers in the cliff, put 'em in ambient suits to fool infrared."

"No!" Konrad swallowed hard. "This isn't business, it's personal. Don't do anything." Yerzy pursed his lips and walked out, footsteps fading down the hall. Konrad clasped his hands together to control their tremor.

Twilight crept over the beach. The last flickers of the sun were reflected off the beaten copper sea. Reyma stood at the water line. A freshening breeze fluttered her loose gown. Yerzy was a shadow beside McKillough's chair, his sloping face passive as he waited. Night evolved. A first sprinkling of stars appeared. From the distance came the whine of a sandcar. Lights rounded the base of the cliff, slicing across the waves.

"Mr. McKillough?" Yerzy cleared his throat and pointed toward the house. Two figures stood on the edge of the bluff. One was Anst, wind whipping his ragged beard. The other was a slender figure, feminine despite the shaved skull, but distance made her features indistinct. Anst held the glittering steel of his switchblade to her throat.

"Shall I?" The man touched the bulge in his jacket.

"Forget it." Konrad chopped at him with a bony hand.

The car idled to a stop and flicked open one door. Burke clenched the wheel and stared straight ahead. Reyma slid inside. With a roar the vehicle turned, traveling through the shallows. Water sprayed from the wheels, flashing in the uncertain light. The whine of the engine faded in the distance. When Konrad looked up, both Anst and the woman had vanished from the cliff.

"I don't like it," Yerzy whispered.

"Shut up." Konrad fumbled with the vid-phone in his lap. The plastic was cool to his touch. As the minutes passed slowly, it became as warm as his hand.

The shrill whistle of the vid-phone made him shrink in fear. He stared at it as it rang a second time. Jerking at the control lever, Konrad backed the wheelchair onto the elevator platform. Yerzy stepped up beside him.

"Get off." Konrad pushed at him impatiently, stabbing at the lift control.

"It might be a trap."

"Get the hell off." His voice quavered. The lift jerked under him, motor humming. Yerzy stood awkwardly, hands at his sides, watching the platform creep up the slope. He was still standing at the base of the cliff when the lift stopped and Konrad rolled onto the landing.

The house was warm and dark and silent. Sweat oozed from his face and arms. He listened, but there was no sound beyond the furious tattoo of his own heart. The dim suggestion of light drew him to the living room like an insect to a distant lamp. A single bulb cast a feeble glow, illuminating the woman reclining on the couch. Shadows etched her profile, and he caught his breath.

"Miriam?" Konrad whispered.

Only an uneven stubble of her auburn hair remained. Her mouth was soft, skin pale as milk. She was swaddled in a loose shift. At his voice, her head moved a fraction as though on oiled bearings.

Konrad rolled closer, caught by the miracle before him. "It's so good to see you, Miriam."

She rose from the couch, light illuminating her face. A jagged tear marred the left cheek, baring steel bone and glassine eye. Her placid stare was chilling.

In that single moment, the dream dissolved around him, the whole frail fabric of his reality unraveling. The damaged biobot limped toward him, her grin fixed, the flap of skin on her cheek waving with each clumsy step. He could not scream or even hold his thin arms up in defense. She towered over him, blotting out the light, and Konrad thought he heard Anst laughing as she raised the dragon-hilted knife. ❀

SKIN DEEP

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
art: Stephen E. Fabian

In order to become a free-lance writer on a full-time basis, the author informs us that she has just quit her job as news director at WORT radio station. Many of her articles have appeared in Entrepreneur, Nuclear Times, and Dragon® Magazine. She also writes an occasional book review for Fantasy Review and a regular column for The Art Show News.

As a 1985 Clarion Writers' Workshop graduate, she is pleased to announce that this is her first fiction sale to Amazing® Stories.

"More pancakes, Colin?"

Cullaene looked down at his empty plate so that he wouldn't have to meet Mrs. Fielding's eyes. The use of his alias bothered him more than usual that morning.

"Thank you, no, ma'am. I already ate so much I could burst. If I take another bite, Jared would have to carry me out to the fields."

Mrs. Fielding shot a glance at her husband. Jared was using the last of his pancake to sop up the syrup on his plate.

"On a morning as cold as this, you should eat more," she said as she scooped up Cullaene's plate and set it in the sterilizer. "You could use a little fat to keep you warm."

Cullaene ran his hand over the stubble covering his scalp. Not taking thirds was a mistake, but to take some now would compound it. He would have to watch himself for the rest of the day.

Jared slipped the dripping bit of pancake into his mouth. He grinned and shrugged as he inclined his head toward his wife's back. Cullaene understood the gesture. Jared had used it several times during the week Cullaene worked for them. The farmer knew that his wife seemed pushy, but he was convinced that she meant well.

"More coffee, then?" Mrs. Fielding asked. She stared at him as if she were waiting for another mistake.

"Please." Cullaene handed her his cup. He hated the foreign liquid that colonists drank in gallons. It burned the back of his throat and churned restlessly in his stomach. But he didn't dare say no.

Mrs. Fielding poured his coffee, and Cullaene took a tentative sip as Lucy entered the kitchen. The girl kept tugging her loose sweater over her skirt. She slipped into her place at the table and rubbed her eyes with the heel of



her hand.

"You're running late, little miss," her father said gently.

Lucy nodded. She pushed her plate out of her way and rested both elbows on the table. "I don't think I'm going today, Dad."

"Going?" Mrs. Fielding exclaimed. "Of course, you'll go. You've had a perfect attendance record for three years, Luce. It's no time to break it now —"

"Let her be, Elsie," Jared said. "Can't you see she doesn't feel well?"

The girl's skin was white, and her hands were trembling. Cullaene frowned. She made him nervous this morning. If he hadn't known her parentage, he would have thought she was going to have her first Change. But the colonists had hundreds of diseases with symptoms like hers. And she was old enough to begin puberty. Perhaps she was about to begin her first menstrual period.

Apparently, Mrs. Fielding was having the same thoughts, for she placed her hand on her daughter's forehead. "Well, you don't have a fever," she said. Then her eyes met Cullaene's. "Why don't you men get busy? You have a lot to do today."

Cullaene slid his chair back, happy to leave his full cup of coffee sitting on the table. He pulled on the thick jacket that he had slung over the back of his chair and let himself out the back door.

Jared joined him on the porch. "Think we can finish plowing under?"

Cullaene nodded. The great, hulking machine sat in the half-turned field like a sleeping monster. In a few minutes, Cullaene would climb into the cab and feel the strange gears shiver under his fingers. Jared had said that the machine was old and delicate, but it had to last at least three more years — colonist's years — or they would have to do the seeding by hand. There was no industry on the planet yet. The only way to replace broken equipment was to send to Earth for it, and that took time.

Just as Cullaene turned toward the field, a truck floated onto the landing. He began to walk, as if the arrival of others didn't concern him, but he knew they were coming to see him. The Fieldings seldom had visitors.

"Colin!" Jared was calling him. Cullaene stopped, trying not to panic. He had been incautious this time. Things had happened too fast. He wondered what the colonists would do. Would they imprison him, or would they hurt him? Would they give him a chance to explain the situation and then let him go?

Three colonists, two males and a female, were standing outside the truck. Jared was trying to get them to go toward the house.

"I'll meet you inside," Cullaene shouted back. For a moment he toyed with running. He stared out over the broad expanse of newly cultivated land, toward the forest and rising hills beyond it. Somewhere in there he might find an enclave of his own people, a group of Abandoned Ones who hadn't assimilated, but the chances of that were small. His people had always survived by adaptation. The groups of Abandoned Ones had grown

smaller every year.

He rubbed his hands together. His skin was too dry. If only he could pull off this self-imposed restraint for an hour, he would lie down in the field and encase himself in mud. Then his skin would emerge as soft and pure as the fur on Jared's cats. But he needed his restraint now more than ever. He pulled his jacket tighter and let himself into the kitchen once more.

He could hear the voices of Lucy and her mother rise in a heated discussion from upstairs. Jared had pressed the recycle switch on the old coffee maker, and it was screeching in protest. The three visitors were seated around the table, the woman in Cullaene's seat, and all of them turned as he entered the room.

He nodded and sat by the sterilizer. The heat made his back tingle, and the unusual angle made him feel like a stranger in the kitchen where he had supped for over a week. The visitors stared at him with the same cold look he had seen on the faces of the townspeople.

"This is Colin," Jared said. "He works for me."

Cullaene nodded again. Jared didn't introduce the visitors, and Cullaene wondered if it was an intentional oversight.

"We would like to ask you a few questions about yourself," the woman said. She leaned forward as she spoke, and Cullaene noted that her eyes were a vivid blue.

"May I ask why?"

Jared's hand shook as he poured the coffee. "Colin, it's customary around here —"

"No," the woman interrupted. "It is not customary. We're talking with all the strangers. Surely your hired man has heard of the murder."

Cullaene started. He took the coffee cup Jared offered him, relieved that his own hand did not shake. "No, I hadn't heard."

"We don't talk about such things in this house, Marlene," Jared said to the woman.

Coffee cups rattled in the silence as Jared finished serving everyone. The older man, leaning against the wall behind the table, waited until Jared was through before he spoke.

"It's our first killing in *this* colony, and it's a ghastly one. Out near the ridge, we found the skin of a man floating in the river. At first, we thought it was a body because the water filled the skin like it would fill a sack. Most of the hair was in place, hair so black that when it dried its highlights were blue. We couldn't find any clothes —"

"— or bones for that matter," the other man added.

"That's right," the spokesman continued. "He had been gutted. We scoured the area for the rest of him, and up on the ridge we found blood."

"A great deal of it," Marlene said. "As if they had skinned him while he was still alive."

Cullaene had to wrap his fingers around the hot cup to keep them warm.

He hadn't been careful enough. Things had happened so swiftly that he hadn't had a chance to go deeper into the woods. He felt the fear that had been quivering in the bottom of his stomach settle around his heart.

"And so you're questioning all of the strangers here to see if they could have done it." He spoke as if he were more curious than frightened.

Marlene nodded. She ran a long hand across her hairline to catch any loose strands.

"I didn't kill anyone," Cullaene said. "I'll answer anything you ask."

They asked him careful, probing questions about his life before he had entered their colony, and he answered with equal care, being as truthful as he possibly could. He told them that the first colony he had been with landed on ground unsuitable for farming. The colonists tried hunting and even applied for a mining permit, but nothing worked. Eventually, most returned to Earth. He remained, traveling from family to family, working odd jobs while he tried to find a place to settle. As he spoke, he mentioned occasional details about himself, hoping that the sparse personal comments would prevent deeper probing. He told them about the Johansens whose daughter he had nearly married, the Cassels who taught him how to cultivate land, and the Slingers who nursed him back to health after a particularly debilitating illness. Cullaene told them every place he had ever been except the one place they were truly interested in — the woods that bordered the Fieldings' farm.

He spoke in a gentle tone that Earthlings respected. And he watched Jared's face because he knew that Jared, of any of them, would be the one to realize that Cullaene was not and never had been a colonist. Jared had lived on the planet for fifteen years. Once he had told Cullaene proudly that Lucy, though an orphan, was the first member of this colony born on the planet.

The trust in Jared's eyes never wavered. Cullaene relaxed slightly. If Jared didn't recognize him, no one would.

"They say that this is the way the natives commit murder," Marlene said when Cullaene finished. "We've heard tales from other colonies of bodies — both human and Riame — being found like this."

Cullaene realized that she was still questioning him. "I never heard of this kind of murder before."

She nodded. As if by an unseen cue, all three of them stood. Jared stood with them. "Do you think Riame could be in the area?" he asked.

"It's very likely," Marlene said. "Since you live so close to the woods, you should probably take extra precautions."

"Yes." Jared glanced over at his well-stocked gun cabinet. "I plan to."

The men nodded their approval and started out the door. Marlene turned to Cullaene. "Thank you for your cooperation," she said. "We'll let you know if we have any further questions."

Cullaene stood to accompany them out, but Jared held him back. "Finish

your coffee. We have plenty of time to get to the fields later."

After they went out the door, Cullaene took his coffee and moved to his own seat. Lucy and her mother were still arguing upstairs. He took the opportunity to indulge himself in a quick scratch of his hands and arms. The heat had made the dryness worse.

He wondered if he had been convincing. The three looked as if they had already decided what happened. A murder. He shook his head.

A door slammed upstairs, and the argument grew progressively louder. Cullaene glanced out the window over the sterilizer. Jared was still talking with the three visitors. Cullaene hoped they'd leave soon. Then maybe he'd talk to Jared, explain as best he could why he could no longer stay.

"Where are you going?" Mrs. Fielding shouted. Panic touched the edge of her voice.

"Away from you!" Lucy sounded on the verge of tears. Cullaene could hear her stamp her way down the stairs. Suddenly, the footsteps stopped. "No! You stay away from me! I need time to think!"

"You can't have time to think! We've got to find out what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong!"

"Lucy —"

"You take another step and I swear I'll leave!" Lucy backed her way into the kitchen, slammed the door, and leaned on it. Then she noticed Cullaene, and all the fight left her face.

"How long have you been here?" she whispered.

He poured his now-cold coffee into the recycler that they had set aside for him. "I won't say anything to your father, if that's what you're worried about. I don't even know why you were fighting."

There was no room left in the sterilizer, so he set the cup next to the tiny boiler that purified the ground water. Lucy slid a chair back, and it creaked as she sat in it. Cullaene took another glance out the window. Jared and his visitors seemed to be arguing.

What would he do if they decided he was guilty? He couldn't disappear. They had a description of him that they would send to other colonies. He could search for the Abandoned Ones, but even if he found them, they might not take him in. He had lived with the colonists all his life. He looked human, and sometimes, he even felt human.

Something crashed behind him. Cullaene turned in time to see Lucy stumble over her chair as she backed away from the overturned coffee maker. Coffee ran down the wall, and the sterilizer hissed. He hurried to her side, moved the chair, and got her to a safer corner of the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded. A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye. "I didn't grab it tight, I guess."

"Why don't you sit down. I'll clean it up —" Cullaene stopped as Lucy's tear landed on the back of his hand. The drop was heavy and lined with red.

He watched it leave a pink trail as it rolled off his skin onto the floor. Slowly, he looked up into her frightened eyes. More blood-filled tears threatened. He wiped one from her eyelashes and rolled it around between his fingertips.

Suddenly, she tried to pull away from him, and he tightened his grip on her arm. He slid back the sleeve of her sweater. The flesh hung in folds around her elbow and wrist. He touched her wrist lightly and noted that the sweat from her pores was also rimmed in blood.

"How long?" he whispered. "How long has this been happening to you?"

The tears began to flow easily now. It looked as if she were bleeding from her eyes. "Yesterday morning."

He shook his head. "It had to start sooner than that. You would have itched badly. Like a rash."

"A week ago."

He let her go. Poor girl. A week alone without anyone telling her anything. She would hurt by now. The pain and the weakness would be nearly intolerable.

"What is it?" Her voice was filled with fear.

Cullaene stared at her, then, as the full horror finally reached him. He had been prepared from birth for the Change, but Lucy thought she was human. And suddenly he looked out the window again at Jared. Jared, who had found the orphaned girl without even trying to discover anything about the type of life form he raised. Jared, who must have assumed that because the child looked human, she was human.

She was rubbing her wrist. The skin was already so loose that the pressure of his hand hadn't left a mark on it.

"It's normal," he said. "It's the Change. The first time — the first time can be painful, but I can help you through it."

The instant he said the words, he regretted them. If he helped her, he'd have to stay. He was about to contradict himself when the kitchen door clicked shut.

Mrs. Fielding looked at the spilled coffee, then at the humped skin on Lucy's arm. The older woman seemed frightened and vulnerable. She held out her hand to her daughter, but Lucy didn't move. "She's sick," Mrs. Fielding said.

"Sick?" Cullaene permitted himself a small ironic smile. These people didn't realize what they had done to Lucy. "How do you know? You've never experienced anything like this before, have you?"

Mrs. Fielding was flushed. "Have you?"

"Of course, I have. It's perfectly normal development in an adult Riame."

"And you'd be able to help her?"

The hope in her voice mitigated some of his anger. He could probably trust Mrs. Fielding to keep his secret. She had no one else to turn to right

now. "I was able to help myself."

"You're Riame?" she whispered. Suddenly, the color drained from her face. "Oh, my God."

Cullaene could feel a chill run through him. He'd made the wrong choice. Before he was able to stop her, she had pulled the porch door open. "Jared!" she called. "Get in here right away! Colin — Colin says he's a Riame!"

Cullaene froze. She couldn't be saying that. Not now. Not when her daughter was about to go through one of life's most painful experiences unprepared. Lucy needed him right now. Her mother couldn't help her, and neither could the other colonists. If they tried to stop the bleeding, it would kill her.

He had made his decision. He grabbed Lucy and swung her horizontally across his back, locking her body in position with his arms. She was kicking and pounding on his side. Mrs. Fielding started to scream. Cullaene let go of Lucy's legs for a moment, grabbed the doorknob, and let himself out into the hallway. Lucy had her feet braced against the floor, forcing him to drag her. He continued to move swiftly toward the front door. When he reached it, he yanked it open and ran into the cold morning air.

Lucy had almost worked herself free. He shifted her slightly against his back and managed to capture her knees again. The skin had broken where he touched her. She would leave a trail of blood.

The girl was so frightened that she wasn't even screaming. She hit him in the soft flesh of his side, then leaned over and bit him. The pain almost made him drop her. Suddenly, he spun around and tightened his grip on her.

"I'm trying to help you," he said. "Now stop it."

She stopped struggling and rested limply in his arms. Cullaene found himself hating the Fieldings. Didn't they know there would be questions? Perhaps they could explain the Change as a disease, but what would happen when her friends began to shrivel with age and she remained as young and lovely as she was now? Who would explain that to her?

He ran on a weaving path through the trees. If Jared was thinking, he would know where Cullaene was taking Lucy. But all Cullaene needed was time. Lucy was so near the Change now that it wouldn't take too long to help her through it. But if the others tried to stop it, no matter how good their intentions, they could kill or disfigure the girl.

Cullaene was sobbing air into his lungs. His chest burned. He hadn't run like this in a long time, and Lucy's extra weight was making the movements more difficult. As if the girl could read his thoughts, she began struggling again. She bent her knees and jammed them as hard as she could into his kidneys. He almost tripped, but managed to right himself just in time. The trees were beginning to thin up ahead, and he smelled the thick spice of the river. It would take the others a while to reach him. They couldn't get the truck in here. They would have to come by foot. Maybe he'd have enough

time to help Lucy and to get away.

Cullaene broke into the clearing. Lucy gasped as she saw the ridge. He had to bring her here. She needed the spicy water — and the height. He thought he could hear someone following him now, and he prayed he would have enough time. He had so much to tell her. She had to know about the pigmentation changes, and the possibilities of retaining some skin. But most of all, she had to do what he told her, or she'd be deformed until the next Change, another ten years away.

He bent in half and lugged her up the ridge. The slope of the land was slight enough so that he kept his balance, but great enough to slow him down. He could feel Lucy's heart pounding against his back. The child thought he was going to kill her, and he didn't know how he would overcome that.

When he reached the top of the ridge, he stood, panting, looking over the caramel-colored water. He didn't dare release Lucy right away. They didn't have much time, and he had to explain what was happening to her.

She had stopped struggling. She gripped him as if she were determined to drag him with her when he flung her into the river. In the distance, he could hear faint shouts.

"Lucy, I brought you up here for a reason," he said. Her fingers dug deeper into his flesh. "You're going through what my people call the Change. It's normal. It —"

"I'm not one of your people," she said. "Put me down!"

He stared across the sluggish river into the trees beyond. Even though he had just begun, he felt defeated. The girl had been human for thirteen years. He couldn't alter that in fifteen minutes.

"No, you're not." He set her down, but kept a firm grasp of her wrists. Her sweater and skirt were covered with blood. "But you were born here. Have you ever seen this happen to anyone else?"

He grabbed a loose fold of skin and lifted it. There was a sucking release as the skin separated from the wall of blood. Lucy tried to pull away from him. He drew her closer. "Unfortunately, you believe you are human and so the first one to undergo this. I'm the only one who can help you. I'm a Riame. This has happened to me."

"You don't look like a Riame."

He held back a sharp retort. There was so much that she didn't know. Riame were a shape-shifting people. Parents chose the form of their children at birth. His parents had had enough foresight to give him a human shape. Apparently, so had hers. But she had only seen the Abandoned Ones who retained the shape of the hunters that used to populate the planet's forests.

A cry echoed through the woods. Lucy looked toward it, but Cullaene shook her to get her attention again. "I am Riame," he said. "Your father's friends claimed to have found a body here. But that body they found wasn't

a body at all. It was my skin. I just went through the Change. I shed my skin just as you're going to. And then I came out to find work in your father's farm."

"I don't believe you," she said.

"Lucy, you're bleeding through every pore in your body. Your skin is loose. You feel as if you're floating inside yourself. You panicked when you saw your form outlined in blood on the sheets this morning, didn't you? And your mother, she noticed it, too, didn't she?"

Lucy nodded.

"You have got to trust me because in a few hours the blood will go away, the skin you're wearing now will stick to the new skin beneath it, and you will be ugly and deformed. And in time, the old skin will start to rot. Do you want that to happen to you?"

A bloody tear made its way down Lucy's cheek. "No," she whispered.

"All right then." Cullaene wouldn't let himself feel relief. He could hear unnatural rustlings coming from the woods. "You're going to have to leave your clothes here. Then go to the edge of the ridge, reach your arms over your head to stretch the skin as much as you can, and jump into the river. It's safe, the river is very deep here. As soon as you can feel the cold water on every inch of your body, surface, go to shore, and wrap yourself in mud. That will prevent the itching from starting again."

The fear on her face alarmed him. "You mean I have to strip?"

He bit back his frustration. They didn't have time to work through human taboos. "Yes. Or the old skin won't come off."

Suddenly, he saw something flash in the woods below. It looked like the muzzle of a heat gun. Panic shot through him. Why was he risking his life to help this child? As soon as he emerged at the edge of the ridge, her father would kill him. Cullaene let go of Lucy's wrists. Let her run if she wanted to. He was not going to let himself get killed. Not yet.

But to his surprise, Lucy didn't run. She turned her back and slowly pulled her sweater over her head. Then she slid off the rest of her clothes and walked to the edge of the ridge. Cullaene knew she couldn't feel the cold right now. Her skin was too far away from the nerve endings.

She reached the edge of the ridge, her toes gripping the rock as tightly as her fingers had gripped his arm, and then she turned to look back at him. "I can't," she whispered.

She was so close. Cullaene saw the blood working under the old skin, trying to separate all of it. "You have to," he replied, keeping himself in shadow. "Jump."

Lucy looked down at the river below her, and a shiver ran through her body. She shook her head.

"Do —?" Cullaene stopped himself. If he went into the open, they'd kill him. Then he stared at Lucy for a moment, and felt his resolve waver. "Do you want me to help you?"

He could see the fear and helplessness mix on her face. She wasn't sure what he was going to do, but she wanted to believe him. Suddenly, she set her jaw with determination. "Yes," she said softly.

Cullaene's hands went cold. "All right. I'm going to do this quickly. I'll come up behind you and push you into the river. Point your toes and fall straight. The river is deep and it moves slow. You'll be all right."

Lucy nodded and looked straight ahead. The woods around them were unnaturally quiet. He hurried out of his cover and grabbed her waist, feeling the blood slide away from the pressure of his hands. He paused for a moment, knowing that Jared and his companions would not shoot while he held the girl.

"Point," he said, then pushed.

He could feel the air rush through his fingers as Lucy fell. Suddenly, a white heat blast stabbed his side, and he tumbled after her, whirling and flipping in the icy air. He landed on his stomach in the thick, cold water, knocking the wind out of his body. Cullaene knew that he should stay under and swim away from the banks, but he needed to breathe. He clawed his way to the surface, convinced he would die before he reached it. The fight seemed to take forever, and suddenly he was there, bobbing on top of the river, gasping air into his empty lungs.

Lucy's skin floated next to him, and he felt a moment of triumph before he saw Jared's heat gun leveled at him from the bank.

"Get out," the farmer said tightly. "Get out and tell me what you did with the rest of her before I lose my head altogether."

Cullaene could still go under and swim for it, but what would be the use? He wouldn't be able to change his pigmentation for another ten years or so, and if he managed to swim out of range of their heat guns, he would always be running.

With two long strokes, Cullaene swam to the bank and climbed out of the water. He shivered. It was cold, much too cold to be standing wet near the river. The spice aggravated his new skin's dryness.

Marlene, gun in hand, stood next to Jared, and the two other men were coming out of the woods.

"Where's the rest of her?" Jared asked. His arm was shaking. "On the ridge?"

Cullaene shook his head. He could have hit the gun from Jared's hand and run, but he couldn't stand to see the sadness, the defeat in the man who had befriended him.

"She'll be coming out of the water in a minute."

"You lie!" Jared screamed, and Cullaene saw with shock that the man had nearly snapped.

"No, she will." Cullaene hesitated for a moment. He didn't want to die to keep his people's secret. The Riame always adapted. They'd adapt this time, too. "She's Riame. You know that. This is normal for us."

"She's my daughter!"

"No, she's not. She can't be. This doesn't happen to humans."

A splash from the river bank drew his attention. Lucy pulled herself up alongside the water several feet from them. Her skin was fresh, pink and clean, and her bald head reflected patches of sunlight. She gathered herself into a fetal position and began to rock.

Cullaene started to go to her, but Jared grabbed him. Cullaene tried to shake his arm free, but Jared was too strong for him.

"She's not done yet," Cullaene said.

Marlene had come up beside them. "Let him go, Jared."

"He killed my daughter." Jared's grip tightened on Cullaene's arm.

"No, he didn't. She's right over there."

Jared didn't even look. "That's not my Lucy."

Cullaene swallowed hard. His heart was beating in his throat. He should have run when he had the chance. Now Jared was going to kill him.

"That is Lucy," Marlene said firmly. "Let him go, Jared. He has to help her."

Jared looked over at the girl rocking at the edge of the river bank. His hold loosened, and finally he let his hands drop. Cullaene took two steps backward and rubbed his arms. Relief was making him dizzy.

Marlene had put her arm around Jared as if she, too, didn't trust him. She was watching Cullaene to see what he'd do next. If he ran, she'd get the other two to stop him. Slowly, he turned away from them and went to Lucy's side.

"You need mud, Lucy," he said as he dragged her higher onto the bank. She let him roll her into a cocoon. When he was nearly through, he looked at the man behind him.

Jared had dropped his weapon and was staring at Lucy's skin as it made its way down the river. Marlene still clutched her gun, but her eyes were on Jared, not Cullaene.

"Is she Riiame?" Marlene asked Jared.

The farmer shook his head. "I thought she was human!" he said. Then he raised his voice as if he wanted Cullaene to hear. "I thought she was human!"

Cullaene took a handful of mud and started painting the skin on Lucy's face. She had closed her eyes and was lying very still. She would need time to recover from the shock.

"I thought they were going to kill her," Jared said brokenly. "There were two of them and she was so little and I thought they were going to kill her." His voice dropped. "So I killed them first."

Cullaene's fingers froze on Lucy's cheek. Jared had killed Lucy's parents because they didn't look human. Cullaene dipped his hands in more mud and continued working. He hoped they would let him leave when he finished.

He placed the last of the mud on the girl's face. Jared came up beside him. "You're Riame too, aren't you? And you look human."

Cullaene washed the mud from his shaking hands. He was very frightened. What would he do now? Leave with Lucy, and try to teach the child that she wasn't human at all? He turned to face Jared. "What are you going to do with Lucy?"

"Will she be okay?" the farmer asked.

Cullaene stared at Jared for a moment. All the color had drained from the farmer's face, and he looked close to tears. Jared had finally realized what he had done.

"She should be," Cullaene said. "But someone has to explain this to her. It'll happen again. And there are other things."

He stopped, remembering his aborted love affair with a human woman. Ultimately, their forms had proven incompatible. He wasn't really human, although it was so easy to forget that. He only appeared human.

"Other things?"

"Difficult things." Cullaene shivered again. He would get ill from these wet clothes. "If you want, I'll take her with me. You won't have to deal with her then."

"No." Jared reached out to touch the mud-encased girl, but his hand hovered over her shell, never quite resting on it. "She's my daughter. I raised her. I can't just let her run off and disappear."

Cullaene swallowed heavily. He didn't understand these creatures. They killed Abandoned Ones on a whim, professed fear and hatred of the Riame, and then would offer to keep one in their home.

"That was your skin that they found, wasn't it?" Jared asked. "This just happened to you."

Cullaene nodded. His muscles were tense. He wasn't sure what Jared was going to do.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

Cullaene looked at Jared for a moment. Because, he wanted to say, the woman I loved screamed and spat at me when she found out. Because one farmer nearly killed me with an axe. Because your people don't know how to cope with anything different, even when *they* are the aliens on a new planet.

"I didn't think you'd understand," he said. Suddenly, he grabbed Jared's hand and set it on the hardening mud covering Lucy's shoulder. Then he stood up. There had to be Abandoned Ones in these woods. He would find them if Jared didn't kill him first. He started to walk.

"Colin," Jared began, but Cullaene didn't stop. Marlene reached his side and grabbed him. Cullaene glared at her, but she didn't let go. He was too frightened to hit her, too frightened to try to break free. If she held him, maybe they weren't going to kill him after all.

She ripped open the side of Cullaene's shirt and examined the damage left by the heat blast. The skin was puckered and withered, and Cullaene sud-

denly realized how much it ached.

"Can we treat this?" she asked.

"Are you asking for permission?" Cullaene could barely keep the sarcasm from his voice.

"No." The woman looked down and blushed deeply as some humans did when their shame was fullest. "I was asking if we had the skill."

Cullaene relaxed enough to smile. "You have the skill."

"Then," she said. "May we treat you?"

Cullaene nodded. He allowed himself to be led back to Jared's side. Jared was staring at his daughter, letting tears fall onto the cocoon of mud.

"You can take her out of there soon," Cullaene said. "Her clothes are up on the ridge. I'll get them."

And before anyone could stop him, Cullaene went into the woods and started up the ridge. He could escape now. He could simply turn around and run away. But he wasn't sure he wanted to do that.

When he reached the top of the ridge, he peered down at Jared, his frightened daughter, and the woman who protected them. They had a lot of explaining to do to Lucy. But if she was strong enough to survive the Change, she was strong enough to survive anything.

Cullaene draped her bloody clothes over his arm and started back down the ridge. When he reached the others, he handed the clothes to Marlene. Then Cullaene crouched beside Jared. Carefully, Cullaene made a hole in the mud and began to peel it off Lucy. Jared watched him for a moment. Then, he slipped his fingers into a crack, and together the alien and the native freed the girl from her handmade shell. ❁

SOME UFO CREATURES

Some UFO creatures came calling,
Found conditions on Earth so appalling
 They packed their valises,
 Their passports and visas,
 Their cures for diseases
 And their message from Jesus,
And zapped back to Andromeda, bawling.

— Mike Curry



Terry Lee

Terry Lee received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in art and a Bachelor of Liberal Arts in psychology and philosophy from the University of Kansas.

When preparing black-and-white illustrations, Terry uses graphite pencils, as he feels that they blend and erase easily. His color artwork, however, is mostly done in acrylic paints, for a number of reasons. First, acrylics dry quickly and are very durable.

Second, acrylics can be applied with an airbrush for extremely smooth shading and modeling. And third, acrylics can be used in techniques similar to those used in applying oil paint, water color, and egg tempera.

In terms of his artwork, Terry's current goals are to develop better figure-drawing ability and to improve and diversify his color-painting techniques. Thus, he takes on projects, such as illustrating for the SF and fantasy magazines, in which he can improve in these two areas.

But besides doing artwork, Terry also enjoys reading fantasy and science-fiction tales. As far back as his grade-school years, Terry admired and envied those artists whose works appeared in the SF magazines.



"Musical Transformation," 1983

Because he has a personal preference for realistic art, Terry is able to combine in SF and fantasy illustrations two of his favorite things: fantasy concepts and photographic rendering. Terry has been a serious illustrator for the SF field for the past three years, and his works have appeared in such magazines as *Analog* and *Amazing® Stories*, and in the anthology *FANTASTIC™ Stories: Tales of the Weird & Wondrous*.

Those who are interested in commissions or purchases, or in finding out more about Terry's artwork, can contact him at his studio. Write to: Terry Lee, 6214 W. 67th Terrace, Overland Park KS 66204.

"Into Gold," 1985



Terry Lee

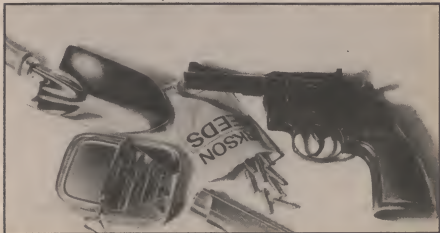
"The Overly Familiar," 1985



"Taking the Low Road," 1985



"On for the Long Haul," 1985



THE GOLDEN BRACELET

by Jennifer Swift

art: Paul Jaquays

Jennifer Swift currently resides in Oxford, England, where her husband is studying theology at Oxford University. There, she tutors English as a foreign language. When not busy writing her next story, she occupies herself with one of her other interests: the politics of world hunger, Christian feminism, and the Inklings.

Jennifer's career as a writer began in 1979, when she attended the Clarion Writers' Workshop. Her first professional sale was to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. "The Golden Bracelet" is her first sale to Amazing® Stories.

It was midafternoon, and the heat of the sun had silenced even the insects when the woman trudging down the road in the dull yellow robes of a priestess heard the delightful sound of running water. Hidden by a thicket of willows, a brook ran beside the road. Anat stopped walking and rubbed her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand. She was a handsome woman of twenty-five, with high cheekbones and clear brown skin, but her forehead was already lined, and her dark eyes smoldered. Taking her staff in hand, Anat beat the dry grass on the bank to frighten away snakes and made her way down to the water's edge. Late summer shallow, the brook gurgled over its gravelly bed, through reeds and rushes, and around waterworn yellow boulders. Anat squatted down, cupped her hands, and splashed water on her face. It wasn't until she looked up, water trickling from her hair, that she saw the girl watching her from the other side of the brook.

Though her breasts were small, the girl was almost a woman's height. Bits of leaves and brambles were tangled in her long black hair, dirt streaked her face, and her only garment was a tattered red loincloth decorated with tarnished gilt embroidery. But true gold flashed in the girl's hands. It was a serpent, a bit of flexible jewelry which the girl was spiraling around her fingers.

Anat grabbed her staff and got to her feet. "You must be T'thea," she said. "It's lucky for you that I've found you at last."

The girl smiled. "You wouldn't have found me if I hadn't let you. But you might as well go back to where you came from because I'm not going to be an Isshara priestess."

The wild creature's fluency surprised Anat, but she replied, "I don't see that you have a choice in the matter, young woman. You have received the anointing, and you must learn to use your power properly — if you do not,



you will go mad.”

The girl tugged at her hair and pulled a bramble free. She dropped it into the brook, where it bobbed on the surface for a moment before the current carried it away. “Don’t you believe me?” Anat said.

“It may have happened to others,” T’thea said, “but I know I’m different.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Oh, because.” A splash of sunlight fell on the girl’s hands and on the bracelet, making its ruby eyes sparkle.

Anat ground the bottom of her staff into the gravel on the bank. “Or is it something you believe because you want it to be true?”

The girl’s shoulders stiffened. “It’s not my imagination. It told me — the demon that gives the power told me” — her fingers carefully stroked the tiny golden scales of the bracelet — “that my power is special and won’t make me go mad.”

Anat’s staff jerked through the gravel, gouging a deep line. “The anointing is not demon possession.” She pointed to the serpent bracelet. “That was made by the Eloni, the ancient ones, who built the black stoneworks and left behind jewelry like that. You dug it up somewhere, and then when you were playing with it, it pricked you, didn’t it?”

T’thea’s hand closed protectively over the bracelet. “Yes, it did. But all that happened was I slept for a long time — I was fine when I woke up. And I could hear the demon.”

“It wasn’t a demon that took possession of you when your finger was pricked,” said Anat. “A tiny creature entered your blood and built a new structure in your brain while you slept. Tell me more about this ‘demon’ of yours.”

“It’s mostly a voice that tells me things and shows me places. There’s a dark place with big statues of sleeping people, and it takes me there a lot.”

Anat clenched her hand into a fist. “That is one of the vestibules of the alaya-vijyana, and if you have indeed been that far, don’t go again. You’ve been lucky; you have no idea how terribly easy it is to get trapped there.”

“But I’ve been there lots of times and always got back, so the demon is right!”

Anger hardened Anat’s face. “There isn’t any demon, I say, and you must not go there again.” She put her foot on one of the flat boulders in the stream, intending to take the girl by the hand.

“You’re blind, old witch!” shouted T’thea, thrusting out her hand. Suddenly, Anat couldn’t see; the world became grey emptiness. Terrified, she groped forward, and her sandal slipped on a wet rock. She fell into the stream, drenching her robe and bruising her knees. But the pain and the cold water broke her panic. She dug her fingers into the gravel of the streambed and remained crouched there until the formless grey brightened, then resolved into the multicolored pebbles of the streambed.

She sat on a boulder and spread out her skirt to dry. Her hands trembled with a fear rapidly reverting to anger. "To be caught by such a simple trick, done by an ignorant Adasi girl —" She stopped because it was not the blinding which had badly shaken her, but that she thought she'd again been thrust unprepared into the alaya-vijyana.

She took a soursop from her satchel, cut it in half with her belt knife, and began scooping the flesh out with her teeth. She chewed rapidly, spitting the seeds into the palm of her hand. How unfair that that girl should have been given so much, when I — Anat scratched a hole in the ground with her staff and buried the fruit skin and seeds, stamping the earth down with her heel.

She returned to the road and walked toward T'thea's parents' house. Still angry, she swung her staff vigorously. Now that she'd finally met the girl, she was no longer eager to bring her to the abbey. Even if the girl were clean and outwardly obedient, Anat would never be able to forget her as she'd first seen her — a wild creature, oblivious to order and self-restraint, yet able to go freely where Anat could not. But, Anat told herself, this was all accidental — by chance, the girl had received much power, just as she, by chance, had become trapped in the alaya-vijyana after her initiation. Only after three days had she been found and rescued, and the shock had crippled her power. It was a trial, sent by the One, just as this girl was another trial. Despite the girl's resistance, Anat believed herself equal to the task. She blamed the sun for her headache.

A broad veranda encircled the girl's parents' house, and as Anat walked up the path, she saw a man sitting there, working at a loom. His bare back was to Anat, and though he must have heard her sandals slap as she came up the steps, he did not turn. Bent over the red and gold yarns filling the woof, he did not glance around, even when Anat stood behind him, so close she could smell the sweat on his back and see the way his curly hair was turning grey at the nape of his neck. "Well," she said, "I've finally met your daughter."

H'so jerked around, his dark eyes searching the yard. "She's not come back with you?"

Anat seated herself on one of the hard black cushions scattered on the porch, glad her robe had completely dried. "She didn't want to come, and I decided not to use force."

"I told you she wouldn't."

"But she must be trained, whatever she thinks she wants, or she'll soon be trapped in the alaya-vijyana and spend the rest of her life in a coma."

The soft click and hum of the loom filled the silence for a moment. Then H'so said, "I told you we've warned her. But she also knows that if she goes with you and becomes a priestess, she won't be Adasi anymore." He stopped the shuttle and began pulling out the last few rows of the woof. "Of course, I don't want to see T'thea in a coma — I want her to live. But she'll be far away, speaking your language, following your religion, becoming a stranger.

That's what she's afraid of."

And she believes that demon of hers will protect her, Anat thought. She asked, "Are you going to leave food for T'thea in the orchard tonight?"

"I suppose. She doesn't like eating with us anymore —"

"Good. I'll wait for her there, and this time she'll come back with me."

"Very well." He didn't sound happy. "I would think that this power — the anointing, you call it — must be a heavy burden."

Anat was rubbing her robe with her fingers, trying to smooth out a wrinkle. "It is an honor, not a burden."

"But surely many honors are burdensome." He turned to her, his hands open. "Please don't think me presumptuous, lady. I'm only thinking of T'thea, of what her future may be like, when I say that this power seems a burden to you."

Anat's face flushed with heat. How was it possible that even an Adasi could see she was a crippled priestess? "It is a great responsibility," she said, "to guard the gates of the mind and the undermind of all."

"But can a priestess expect a happy life, cut off as you are from normal human life and feeling?"

Anat's face grew still hotter. "It is true we cannot marry or have children because of the danger of passing on the madness, but we have hearts just like the rest of humanity."

"And something is weighing down your heart?"

Anat was sullen and did not reply.

"There is something, isn't there?" he went on gently. "Your face says that you are unhappy, and I thought perhaps you'd had to reject a lover —"

"My problem is one your daughter will never have," Anat said brusquely, getting to her feet. "I'm going to the orchard."

"Please be gentle with her," he called after Anat.

Of course I will, thought Anat as she went down the back steps, making her way toward the orchard.

A plump woman with a basket of vegetables on one hip was coming up the path, leading a boy by the hand. Seeing the priestess, the woman stopped, and the boy shrank behind her. "May the blessings of the Mother be upon you, R'we," said Anat.

R'we shifted the basket to her other hip. "And the Father's on you."

Anat chose to overlook this misunderstanding of the divine nature and said, "I met your daughter this afternoon. She doesn't understand that she must accept training."

R'we lightly stroked her son's hair. "She was always headstrong."

The woman's lack of urgency angered Anat. "I think T'thea might be less reluctant if she knew her parents approved her training, not just as a last resort, but as an honor in itself —"

"I'm only a farmer and cannot understand these high Isshara matters." R'we began to walk past Anat.

"I know it must be painful for you that she has to go away," said Anat, "but it will be a great honor to have a daughter in the Order."

At the door of her house, R'we turned back. "Poking and prying into other people's minds is not honor."

Anat shook her head. "Priestesses are not thought-readers. Instead, we reach into the alaya-vijyana — the great undermind lying beneath all of our separate consciousnesses. Everyone journeys a little way down there in some dreams, but it is the special gift of a priestess to be able to journey there intentionally."

"To rob a mother of her child, that's no great gift," said R'we. Then she added, "I'll have Keret bring you some milk and fruit while you wait in the orchard." She turned her back on Anat's thanks and disappeared into the house.

The sun stood well above the horizon when Anat went into the orchard. She seated herself in the tall yellow grass, knowing that her robe would make her inconspicuous, and rested her back against the smooth bark of a candlenut tree. Keret soon came with two baskets, one which he silently put at Anat's feet, his eyes wide, and one which he left on a weathered wooden table. Anat left hers untouched; she did not want to make any sound that might alert the girl to her presence. Slowly, the sun's light faded, the air cooled, and the birdsong in the trees grew louder. Anat tried to empty her mind, but the image of the girl in the bright loincloth kept intruding. Does she really fear losing her parents? She's wild and doesn't care about anyone at all. And it would only be leaving home, not a true loss.

Long ago she'd sat as she sat now, waiting for the bodies of her parents to be found after a storm swamped their small boat. Rain and hail pounded the reed roof of her aunt's house, where Anat had crouched in the dark, hearing but not understanding the voices of adults in the other room. The pain of her loss was a great shape beside her in the darkness, and she knew she had to keep it from herself lest it destroy her, so she did not cry. She squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the skin above her knee until it bruised, but she did not weep. Five days later, as she watched the smoke of her parents' pyre softly ascend into the clear blue sky, she'd proudly held herself straight because she had never wept, though older people had told her she ought to.

Just as the sun was level with the distant blue hills, Anat saw a small figure climb over the low stone wall at the foot of the orchard. Immediately, she masked her mind's presence by emptying it of all words and images. The girl climbed atop the table, took the lid off the basket, and began removing its contents. The priestess sat as still as the air at twilight while the girl crammed bread and fruit into her mouth.

It was not until the table was littered with crumbs and discarded wrappings that Anat spoke. "It will be dark soon."

The girl jumped down from the table and swung about until she spotted Anat. "Oh, it's you again. Well, I'm not afraid of the dark."

"That's good. A priestess shouldn't fear such things."

"I already told you I'm not going to be an Isshara priestess." T'thea crossed her thin arms on her chest.

"Listen, T'thea, that jiva — that demon of yours — cannot save you from coma. Only the discipline of the Order can."

T'thea hung back. "That's what you say. But why should I trust you?"

"Because as a member of the Order, I know. That 'demon' of yours we call a jiva — it's bits of consciousness, often of your own mind — and thus it tends to say things you want to hear. But no jiva can teach you the techniques you must know to prevent yourself from getting lost and trapped in the alaya-vijyana."

T'thea kicked at the grass with her bare foot. The serpent bracelet on her wrist glinted dully in the light of the rising moon. "Do you go to that alaya-something a lot?"

A chill touched the back of Anat's arms, but she answered calmly. "Yes, it's necessary for almost all our work."

"No, I mean do you yourself do it lots?"

Anat shrugged. "Oh, of course, many times."

"Why are you afraid of it, then?"

Anat stared at the girl. Silver moonlight gleamed in T'thea's dark eyes and frosted her tangled hair with an unearthly beauty; to Anat, she looked half child-goddess, half animal. The priestess whipped out her hand and seized the girl's wrist. "If you really knew what it was like, you would fear it, too. It is a terrible place, not a hideaway for a little girl who doesn't want to do what she's told."

T'thea tried to pull her hand from Anat's grip. "No, I won't leave, I won't! I don't want to go away and never see anyone again, and I don't want to get teased by Isshara girls —" She swung her bare foot to kick Anat, at the same time sending out the blinding command. But Anat evaded it by blanking her mind for an instant so that it found no target. Then she grabbed the girl's ankle, bringing her down on the grass with a thump.

Keeping hold of T'thea's wrist and ankle despite her thrashing, Anat leaned down and pressed her forehead against the girl's to impose a control over the girl's body. T'thea rolled her head away. Her breathing was harsh, and her eyes stared wildly. "This won't hurt," Anat said aloud. "I'm just going to help your body relax so you won't feel so frightened." But as she spoke, the girl's body went limp in her grasp. Anat jerked back in surprise. The girl's chest was rising and falling in the rhythm of deep sleep.

"No!" Anat let go of T'thea's wrist and slapped the girl on the cheek, first lightly, then harder. "Wake up! Come back!" But the girl's eyes remained closed. Anat pulled up one of T'thea's eyelids — the pupil was huge, the iris almost vanished. The girl was deep in the alaya-vijyana. But had her transition been deliberate, or had she simply leapt in terror, without any control? Anat dismissed her impulse to run away and sat back on her heels. She bit

her thumbnail and thought a moment. Then she bent down, picked up the girl's body, and began to walk toward her parents' house.

It was a slow journey. To keep her mind from dwelling on the dangers of entering the alaya-vijyana alone to search for the girl, Anat reminded herself of why she had become a priestess. She had known, from watching the sisters who visited her aunt, that their faces were always grave and quiet; they certainly never laughed, so they must not weep either. Why should they? They had the key to the door of the alaya-vijyana and thus knew the branches and trunk and roots of the great tree of which every living person was a mere flower or leaf. Young Anat had watched the way the priestesses held their tiny stone cups of black tea in their slender fingers, and she knew from the very posture of their hands that they were women of great but hidden power, buttressed against all that might harm them by their arduous and intricate discipline. Within a year of her parents' death, she wore the soft grey skirt of a postulant.

As Anat entered the yellow lamplight of the central room, Keret, making a town of blocks by the hearth, was the first to see her. His mouth made an O of surprise. Then R'we looked up from the account tables in her lap. Her hands clenched into fists. H'so's stool grated on the wooden floor as he turned from his loom to see what was happening.

Anat's face grew fiery hot as they looked at her. "I think T'thea has lost her way in the alaya-vijyana," she said roughly. "I'll have to go after her and try to find her. You must send for the nearest priestess — I think there's one in Terqua — to assist me. I'll need a private room."

They took her to T'thea's own bedroom, a large airy one with windows opening on the veranda. Anat laid T'thea down on the summer bed, a hammock stretched on a wooden frame. She sent the girl's father to get hot water and hunted through her satchel for useful herbs. R'we came in to wash her daughter's face and hands. "Is she in that coma you spoke of, lady?"

Anat hesitated. "I think she may not be very deep yet."

The woman was studying her daughter's face. "Will you be able to bring her back, lady?"

"I will try."

"There's little hope, you mean?"

"I wouldn't say that." Anat's hands ached with cold, and she rubbed them briskly. "I haven't had to trace someone lost in the alaya before, but I know it's better to go in now than to wait for someone else, no matter how experienced." She was thinking of Su-sin, her body in a coma, in a room off the garden of Anat's abbey. Su-sin had been a talented priestess, rising to the blue level of the Order, but she had gone exploring in little known branches of the alaya-vijyana and had not returned to her body. Nearly every chapter house had a case like hers.

"I'm sorry if I spoke rudely to you, lady," R'we said.

Her desperate humility made Anat blush. "I'll do my best to find her."

H'so came in with a small copper kettle, steam jetting from its spout. Anat took a silver bowl from her satchel, threw in a handful of altheas, then poured water on the crumpled leaves. A sweet fresh smell filled the room. R'we left, but H'so lingered in the doorway. "I'm going to the village to send a message to that priestess. Is there anything special she ought to know?"

"If you people don't leave me alone, I won't be able to do a thing for T'thea!" H'so stepped back as if she'd struck him. "Oh, very well, just tell her it's urgent, and that —" that priestess has to know, she thought, and there's no time to write a private note — "I have some difficulty returning from the alaya-vijyana on my own. I . . . I've never done it without assistance." Her forehead flushed hot to the roots of her hair.

But H'so didn't look shocked, merely puzzled. "Certainly I'll give that message, lady. Do you think T'thea has a similar difficulty?"

"Not from what she told me. I think she panicked and entered the alaya without knowing where she was going."

"Good journeying, lady." He bowed slightly. Anat seated herself on a stool next to the girl's bed and put the silver bowl in her lap, holding her face over it until the steam beaded her skin and her mind was calmer.

Clasping the girl's left hand between her own hands, Anat leaned down until her forehead lightly touched the girl's. She began to empty her mind, concentrating on uniting her breathing with the girl's slow, shallow breaths. For a long while, the tightness in her stomach, the pain from her bruised knees, the shrilling of crickets outside the window, all sought for her attention. But she did not allow her awareness to focus on any specific sensation; she was attentive to the whole, without differentiating it. Then, hovering at the edge of her mind, came an image of herself occupying a bed next to T'thea in her abbey, honored as a martyr, but she refused to be drawn to it. Gradually, her mind emptied itself of surface thoughts and grew open to that which lay beneath.

She found herself moving through one of the patches of memory sometimes encountered at the gate of the alaya-vijyana: she wore the purple robe of one about to be initiated, and she was at her aunt's funeral two years ago. Only once, when she thought she saw her aunt's hands through the flames, had some moisture come into her eyes. But at that moment an old man, a neighbor of her aunt's, had patted her hand and said, "There, dearie, let the tears come." Instantly, her eyes had dried. And she had later refused to have her initiation postponed. Because she had been a favorite, the traditions about mourning were ignored, and the ceremony proceeded.

Though her eyes were open, it was a while before they saw the flash of gold on the floorboards — the girl's bracelet, seen through the netting of the hammock. It was moving like a living serpent, its head swinging from side to side and its black tongue flickering. It was a jiva, and Anat wondered how reliable it was. "Serpent, take me to T'thea," she commanded.

"She is deep," it said.

"Take me to her," Anat repeated.

The serpent grasped its tail in its jaws, writhed, then stood as a hoop and rolled toward the large window opening on the porch. As it passed through the netting curtain, the fabric vanished, and there was nothing but blackness without, no stars or moon. Anat rose, with the curious sensation of lightness which told her she was leaving her physical body. She reached down and touched her own arm from the outside. She could barely indent the skin. With intense concentration she took a long pin and jabbed it into her physical arm. Both bodies jerked with pain, but she quickly pressed her shadowy palm against the spot of blood appearing on her physical arm. She pulled her hand away and closed it — the blood was like a small lead weight, fiery-hot. Then she passed through the window into the blackness.

When she opened her fingers, a ruby light radiated from the spot of blood. She was in a hall of what seemed a great palace: the floor was paved with dull gold, and tall columns of rosy quartz soared high in the darkness overhead. She blew on her hand, and the red glow brightened until she could make out a vast dark shape ahead of her — the gigantic figure of a sleeping woman. Drawing closer, Anat saw that under her crown of lilies and violets the woman's features were T'thea's, though altered into an ageless maturity. Near the figure's throat something moved — the serpent.

"Is she here in the hall of subtle bodies, the *linga shirara*?" Anat asked. Her breath made a faint mist in the air.

"No!" The serpent coiled into a helix, then sprang up into the air and flew between the parted lips of the sleeping T'thea.

The light in Anat's hand dimmed as it echoed her shock of fear. She glanced over her shoulder and saw nothing but distant sleepers and darkness. The other priestess would surely come to the *linga shirara*, but without the aid of the serpent, it wasn't likely she'd find T'thea's form. And even then she'd have to guess Anat had gone into the girl's form because there was no way to leave a mark or a message in this changeless place. Anat could wait here until the other arrived and point the way the serpent had gone, but in that time T'thea could become untraceable. What Anat carried in her hand should make her equal to most threats, though unfortunately it could not guide her back. But if she located the girl, could she bring her back to the *linga shirara*, where the other priestess could find them and help them leave the *alaya*? After all, Anat had never been able to return to any point in the *alaya* without assistance. Then it occurred to Anat that if T'thea were permanently lost, there would be an inquiry, and she would be asked, "Why did you use force against the girl? Didn't you realize fear might push her unprepared into the *alaya-vijyana*?"

Anat drew closer to the form of the sleeping T'thea. Though the breast of the giantess rose and fell, no air stirred from her mouth or lips. Anat brought the feeble red glow in her hand as close as she dared to the parted

lips of the giantess. She could see nothing within. Her hesitation shamed her — she knew what the Order would say was right, but she could not bring herself to do it. Suddenly, she remembered T'thea saying, "You're afraid." She closed her hand over her light, pressed it to her chest, and jumped forward into the giantess's mouth.

She felt sand under her feet and heard the cries of sea birds overhead. She opened her eyes and found she was on the beach of a mist-shrouded ocean whose waves lapped gently near her feet. It was bright day but overcast, and the light seemed diffused throughout the sky. Keeping her hand tightly closed, she walked down the beach toward the person she saw in the distance. Coming near, she saw a girl who looked like T'thea, her proper size, her skin very clean, her body sheathed from neck to ankles in a dress of golden scales. Twin rubies flashed at the base of her throat, and there was a willingness in her eyes that Anat had not seen in the grubby T'thea of the conscious world.

"Greetings, Lady Anat Suturul," she said.

"Who are you?" Anat demanded, sure that this creature was not T'thea.

"I speak for T'thea."

"Then tell her she must come with me. Otherwise her gift will be wasted and her parents mourn."

"They will mourn in any event," said the girl creature, smiling. Anat thought her benign aloofness was another sign that she could not be T'thea.

"So you refuse to tell her?"

The girl closed her eyes, then opened them as if she had communed with some inner source. "There is a price."

"What is it?"

"What you hide in your hand."

The back of Anat's neck prickled. "No."

"You do not need it," the girl said. "I will not harm you."

"Why should I believe you? Isn't it that you'd like me to be defenseless against you?" Anat's voice was sarcastic, but her heart pounded.

The girl turned away and began walking up the beach, moving with sinuous grace. Anat hurried to follow her, for she did not want to be left alone. They went around a curve in the shoreline and came to a spit of black volcanic sand. The girl crouched down and began digging with her hands in the sand, where it had been swept smooth by the waves. Water seeped into the hole, but the girl continued to scoop out handfuls of dripping sand until she was elbow-deep. Then she pulled something free and lifted it out of the water. It was a small oval box, its wood blackened from exposure to saltwater, fastened with rusty hinges. The girl rose, black sand on the knees of her golden dress, and held the box toward Anat. "Tell me what is inside."

Anat stepped back. The box was slimy and smelled of rot. "Why should I tell you that?"

The girl smiled. "It's something of yours."

Anat frowned, wrinkling her nose. "I don't think I'll want it back. Enough of this game — are you going to lead me to T'thea?"

The girl pointed to Anat's closed hand.

Anat clenched it tighter and shook it at the girl. "There's power here — perhaps it could make you hand T'thea over to me."

The girl raised her hands, showing her bare smooth palms. "T'thea came here with nothing."

Anat's face burned. Suddenly, she lunged forward, reaching for the girl's arm with her open hand, intending to force the truth out of her with what she carried in her fist. But the girl moved even more quickly, grabbing Anat's open hand and jerking her so the priestess fell forward, instinctively opening her fist to break her fall. But the girl dropped the box and struck out, running her palm across Anat's now-open left hand. As the girl's hand crossed hers, Anat felt a great pain in her arm as if the bone had been changed to red-hot iron, and she saw her palm was empty. She fell to the sand, her face beside the box the girl had dropped. It had fallen open and a stinking blue-black gelatinous mass was slowly oozing out of it. Despite the pain in her arm, she jerked herself up and glared at the girl.

The girl opened her hand so Anat could see the red light leaking from between her fingers. "You won't be needing this again."

If she promised to abandon her search for T'thea, the creature might return her blood-talisman, but Anat rejected the idea — she hated the indignity of begging favors from this creature, for now at least. She pointed to the box. "What made you say this belonged to me?"

The girl nudged the box's lid with a bare toe, and Anat saw that the letters of her name had been burned into the wood. "This was made for you long ago," she said. "You must have left it here, and now it's gotten a bit old." She wrinkled her delicate nose.

Anat had backed away until water lapped at her heels. She desperately wanted to dip her burning hand into that water, but she could not turn away from the double menace of the slimy mass at the girl's feet and the hidden power in her hand. "I've never seen anything like that box before. Besides, I've just met T'thea, and that's been lying here for years —"

"In the alaya, all places are one," the girl said. She pointed at the dully glistening ooze. "That might once have looked far different."

"I don't need to be lectured," said Anat, hugging her aching arm to her side. "It's an ugly thing that has nothing to do with me now."

"There might still be some virtue left in it," said the girl.

"Or maybe it's just another way for you to distract me." She pointed at the girl's closed hand. "You've got what you asked for; now fulfill your part of the bargain."

But the girl was still studying what lay on the sand. "It must be here for some reason," she said. Then she added, "It isn't often one finds one's name on things in the matrix."

"So what do you want me to do with it? Pick it up, put it in my pocket, and return to the physical world with it?" The thought of touching it made Anat shudder with disgust, then she forced her eyes away from it. "It will be your fault, not mine, if T'thea's body wastes away in a coma and whatever talent she has comes to nothing."

"Who frightened T'thea so much that she entered the alaya-vijyana unprepared?" asked the girl.

Anat angrily ground her heel into the wet sand. "Maybe I was a little hasty in the orchard, but the girl could not be reasoned with. And I took a great risk in coming here to save her." She thrust out her burning hand, and the sudden action made her head dizzy with pain.

"But you could have spared yourself much pain by not bringing this," said the girl, briefly parting her fingers to reveal a faint red glow. "And it could not protect you from what you fear most."

Anat wanted to scream at the girl; instead she strode up to the contents of the box, thinking she might kick sand over them so that at least her eyes would no longer be offended. Yet when she reached it, she did not cover it; rather she glared down at the tarry mass, wondering how she was ever going to get out of the alaya-vijyana. And this thing at her feet, how dreadful it would be to touch it; she felt she would rather stand there for all eternity, even suffering the pain that afflicted her now, than touch it. Its curdled and blistered surface reminded her of something — yes, her tenth birthday when she'd forced herself to go swimming despite her fear of water after her parents' drowning. "A priestess must not be ruled by fear," she'd told herself. But she'd disturbed a nest of leeches, and they'd fastened on her legs and ankles. She'd carefully removed them and returned them to the water, showing the respect for life that a priestess should have. Yet several days later, when Anat had found a leech on the underside of a stone, she'd sprinkled salt on it, watching in horrified fascination as it dissolved into something like this mass on the beach. Some part of her was dead by then, she realized now. "Should I touch this?" she wondered aloud.

But the girl said nothing.

Anat crouched down, keeping her sore hand cradled against her side, and reached out with her good hand — wait, why should she risk injuring that one, too? Slowly, she drew her burning hand from her side, stretched open her fingers, biting her lip as she did so, tasting blood — and brought her hand close until it hovered just above the mass. Curiously, it seemed quite cold, as if it were chilling the air about it like a block of ice. She still could not make herself touch it. Her helplessness angered her, but not enough to overcome her aversion. Someone was standing over her — the girl creature, smiling her subtle archaic smile. She held her closed fist over Anat's head, then brought it smashing down on the priestess's shoulder, sending a jolt of pain through her arm and forcing her hand into the icy mass. As it enveloped her fingers, she knew she would not be able to scrape it off. Nauseated,

she thrust in her other hand. Then she knew what it was.

Last year, at the prodding of the abbess, she'd made a journey to the capital city to consult a famous priestess who was said to be able to help those who could not move freely in the alaya-vijyana. Anat had been disappointed to find that the great priestess was an undignified old woman whose cheeks bulged when she chewed nuts and who slapped her thighs when she laughed. Their conversation had lasted only a quarter of an hour — the old woman told Anat that the source of her problem was the heretical belief that priestesses should be above suffering, "a popular notion in that chapter house of yours."

An indignant Anat had demanded, "Well, what can I do now?"

The old priestess took the younger woman's hand and, pressing a wrinkled thumb into Anat's palm, said, "Put your heart back."

Now with her hands trapped in the cold muck, Anat said, "It's dead and rotten, useless —" But her throat was swollen shut, and something burned like acid in the corner of her eye, then trickled down her cheek and splashed on her forearm — a drop of clear water.

She felt hands on her shoulders and looked up. It was the girl in the golden dress. "Look now!" She glanced down and saw that the mass had vanished from her hands and on the palm of her left hand was a newly opened red rose, its green stem growing right out of the skin of her hand where the spot of blood had been. The girl closed her fingers beneath the blossom and pulled. Anat gasped; the pain was like having her arm bone jerked out. But the flower was free; the skin of Anat's palm whole and empty. The girl tore a petal off the edge of the rose and dropped it into Anat's open palm.

Anat felt a warm hand between hers and jerked up in surprise. She was back in T'thea's room, with the girl lying beside her. She dropped the girl's hand — on her own was a painful red burn. T'thea was yawning and rubbing her eyes. "I'm hungry," she said.

Several nights later, as Anat came up the path to the house, she saw T'thea and her mother waiting on the veranda. T'thea wore a small pack and carried a satchel. "This is all that she really needs," said R'we, brushing her dark hair back from her wet eyes. "I've put the rest aside and she can send for it when she needs it." The girl's face was stiff and sober in the light of the rising moon. "Her father couldn't come out — this is too painful for him," R'we said.

Anat nodded, feeling she should say something to relieve their pain, but no words came to her.

"The One has ordained it, I suppose," R'we continued, "but we will miss her." Then she and her daughter clasped each other in a tight embrace. Anat, embarrassed, looked away. She was not looking forward to having this girl as her only companion on the six days their journey would take: T'thea was acquiescent now, but Anat doubted her personality had really changed.


Both were silent for a long time as they walked together down the dusty road. Finally, T'thea said, "My golden snake bracelet's gone. I couldn't find it anywhere. You didn't take it, did you?"

Anat shook her head, but a chill touched her spine. "You must have left it — or it left you — in the alaya-vijyana." Their feet made soft noises in the dust. Anat asked cautiously, "Do you remember anything that happened there?"

T'thea frowned. "Yes, but I don't know the words for it. I went to a place that I hadn't been to before. There was a beautiful light and different colors, ones we don't have in this world, and I learned — oh, I can't say, but it was lovely."

Anat felt a surge of indignation, for she had never been privileged to visit that place, but then reminded herself that now, perhaps, she might someday be able to go there. She looked at the girl and noticed that her hair, while now clean, was scraggly and that her fingernails were possibly just as dirty as before. And dangling from her pack — wasn't that a corner of the vulgar red cloth she'd worn when Anat had first seen her?

"Well," she said to the girl, "I found something I had lost."

Above them the moon cast a light so sharp and clear that the willow leaves made precise shadows on the road dust, but their trunks were hidden in the dark and their roots beneath the earth. 

THE EVOLUTION OF NIGHT

Each death, from single cell to blue whale,
leaves a residue that pools with others —
a black by-product of mortality.

Since the first primal soups and pale
outgassings of atmosphere began,
this darkness accrued and deepened.

Every war intensifies its hue.
Every atrocity casts its long silhouette.
Every extinction hastens its dark age beyond.

Though it succumbs to the sun's white heat,
tombstones still tattoo the earth with its shadow
and with dusk it thickens, palpable as fear.

— Robert Frazier

THE PERILS OF NICOLINA

by Phillip C. Jennings

art: George Barr

Since his last piece of correspondence with us, the author has sold a story to Jim Baen for Far Frontiers. As for the story before you, it is his second sf sale to Amazing® Stories, and it focuses on the redeeming virtues of drunken miners in the Old West.

Something had gnawed at the body. The bones and muscles of the upper torso were laid bare, an anatomy lesson veiled by a seething mass of flies. Eli grabbed a shovel to dig a grave.

Eli made his living with pick and shovel. Despite a bad hangover, he excavated a yard-deep hole before the sun reached zenith. The corpse was surprisingly easy to shift. Half its weight had bled off or found its way into some predator's belly. Eli levered the necrotic thing to the edge of the pit and rolled it in.

He finished the burial, then tottered to his cabin and poured a drink. The whiskey sluiced through his stomach like acid. He staggered to a chair, sat, and stared at his cup.

How many days had he been drunk? Who was the dead man?

And how long since he'd eaten solid food?

The pain passed. Eli tottered to the creek. He drank to dilute the poisons in his system, then returned to his cabin and built a fire. Soon the griddle was hot enough for pancakes.

He ransacked his memory while bolting down his first meal in — Let's see, he'd fetched down to Larsonville on Wednesday . . .

Truth to tell, Wednesday was the last day Eli remembered. He'd packed out of town with two jugs of whiskey, and now the second was nigh empty. Today had to be Friday or Saturday. Sunday was out of the question, for he'd have been visited already.

Wait — maybe the corpse *was* his Sunday visitor from the Bible Society! Given its ripeness, that meant he'd been drunk for five or six days, possibly more!

Eli shook his head. Well, at least today wasn't another Sunday, so why not do some work? He'd feel better after a few hours in the mine, so he went outdoors to begin working. Hard labor would sweat out the whiskey and give him time to think.

It might make his fortune, too. There was still gold here, Eli was sure of that. Down in Larsonville everyone thought these hills were played out. Stores were closing, selling stock at bargain prices. Eli compared the town to what it had been. Back in '78 a place like his would have been targeted by

claim-jumpers. What had happened to that old-time criminal zeal, that lawless passion for gold?

Hayes, Garfield, Arthur. Eli had worked this trace through the terms of three presidents, and had seen things change about the time of Garfield's assassination. These last two years the Bible Society had grown up, summoning muleskinners back to childhood piety. Now too, what little was left of Larsonville had a sheriff, a stickler for the rules who was idolized by the righteous mob. Thinking of whom, shouldn't he hide the grave site? Sheriff Keyes wasn't the kind to ignore a corpse.

Eli wheeled his load to the mouth of the tunnel, straightened, and looked about. All was quiet. He strolled to his cabin and surveyed the scene for signs of death. Blood, flies, freshly turned earth . . .

He spent an hour shifting his woodpile to the new location. Now how to disguise the naked ground where it used to lie?

Damn. Always more work!

The sun set. Eli flopped into bed when it got dark. His exhausted body resisted the idea of getting up to pour a drink. For once he decided to leave the stuff alone, though he knew sleep would never come as long as he stayed sober.

He opened his eyes to sunlight and a grinning face at the cabin window. "Hello, brother! Have you time for proof of God's resurrection? I'm here to reveal His wonders —"

"Hell! Sunday already?" Eli questioned.

The lad nodded. "I'm here from the Bible Society to tell you —"

"I know, I know. You one of 'em? A resurrectee? I don't recall seein' you before. It was allus an older feller, Pilgrim Gladful —"

The face grew solemn. "Pilgrim Gladful left Larsonville last Sunday. He never returned from his mission. We fear his soul has fled to God."

"An' whatcha call yerself? What poor sumbitch died so's you could praise the Lord?"

"The soul is immortal, Mr. Littlejohn. My existence is proof of that! The criminal who once inhabited this body was sentenced to death by a legally constituted jury —"

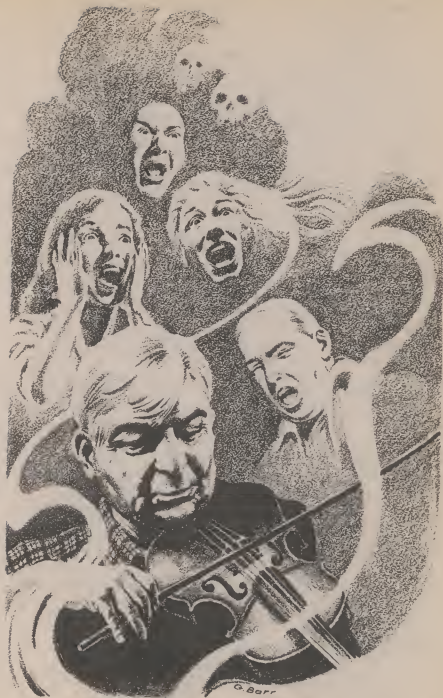
"What was he, some fool of a horse thief?"

"The last of the old mayor's gang. He tried to murder Brother Jeremiah."

Eli rose and emerged into the light of day. He hurried to the creek while his companion dogged his heels. "Cain't you spare me a minute to warsh up?" Eli snarled. "What do they call you anyhow — brother, pilgrim, or saint?"

The lad looked uncomfortable. "I go by Pilgrim John. If you prefer I'll just, uh, find a chore to keep me busy while you bathe."

"Don't come back afterwards neither. I'm no fool for humbug an' Bible wavin'. Pilgrim Gladful, he could of told you that."



Pilgrim John moved from the bank. Eli immersed himself in the cold waters of Cougar Creek. When he finished his ablutions, the mission worker was gone.

Normally nothing less than a shotgun could dissuade a resurrectee from bearing witness. Eli poked into the mine, but Pilgrim John was nowhere to be found.

He went back to his cabin. Soon a passing ear might have heard the strains of fiddle music. *Strain* was an apt work: Eli practiced too rarely to perfect his skills. Had he lived in town, these Sunday hours would have given his neighbors cause for complaint.

The shadows lengthened. The miner was weary of his own cacophony when Sheriff Keyes pounded at his door. "Eli Littlejohn," the man growled. "I need to talk to you."

Eli opened the door. "What's the fuss?"

The sheriff moved to the woodpile and studied the dirt around his boots. He raised his head. "Pilgrim Gladful?"

Eli's makeshift labors had been inadequate. He grimaced. "All I remember is a dead body. There warn't nothin' left of his face."

"Did you kill him?"

Eli shrugged. "If I did, it warn't on purpose."

"Drunk?"

"I lost . . . mor'n a week. I tuck me down to Larsonville a week ago Wednesday. I don't recall much after that."

Sheriff Keyes scratched his head. "Our last real doctor went back to Denver a month ago. I don't know what we'll do for a coroner. If I was you, I wouldn't base my defense on an autopsy because there's not going to be any."

"I'm under arrest?"

The sheriff blinked. "Eli, you're a survivor from the days when life didn't mean much in these hills. We don't ignore death any more. Sure, there's got to be a trial. Until then, you're a guest of the county."

"Kin I pack? I'd like to fetch my valuables."

Keyes nodded.

Larsonville was forty minutes distant by horseback. Eli had plenty of time to ask questions. "What about lawyers?" he inquired. "Will I be able to find me one?"

"You'd get along with Mr. Owens," the sheriff answered. "He's partial to whiskey, too. Problem is, he's not interested in going up against the Bible Society. What's left of Larsonville is mostly converts, and he doesn't want to lose their business."

"So I'm left to roll down the greased skids to perdition. See here, sheriff; ain't no proof yonder body was murdered, much less that I did it."

"It's not my place to judge. If you could think of any evidence in your favor, I'd be happy to sift it out."

Eli fell silent, then spoke again. "You a *con-vert*?"

"I believe in resurrection. I've seen it happen. New souls in old bodies —"

"Pratin' of the raptures to come. Where do they come from? Heaven? Hell? They never say, do they?"

"According to the Good Book, the dead wait to be judged in the Last Times. Until then they sleep, except a few we call ghosts. That's why they don't talk of their afterlives."

"And this machine down in Larsonville, the one what calls 'em into the flesh again — Ain't it interferin' with God's plan to resurrect 'em afore the Day of Judgement?"

"Anything that happens for the good is God's plan. You can't deny these resurrectees are working for good, testifying to the immortality of the soul. Before Professor Spiegel and his soul machine came along, Larsonville was a pit of vice. Silverton was godly in comparison."

They reached town. The sheriff locked Eli in the only building in Larsonville made of brick. The door to the jail was a slab of iron and the floor was dirt. The amenities consisted of two wooden benches and a pair of buckets, one filled with water.

Eli moved to the window. Below the bars was a slit. The sheriff came around to give him a parting nod. "They'll pass food through that hole," he explained.

"Who? Who'll feed me?"

"The Bible Society. Charity, they call it. This way they get a chance to talk to you."

"More preachin'!"

Sheriff Keyes shook his head. "It's not your soul they're after. If you're found guilty of murder, you get to choose whether you're hung or strapped into Spiegel's machine. They'd like you to die their way. The more resurrectees the better."

The sheriff trudged off to his office. Eli rid his cell of a few oversized spiders. After twenty minutes he got used to the smell. Another hour, and he grew bored. He took out his fiddle and began to play.

He heard a thump and a clatter. His window faced the wrong direction. All Eli could tell was that something was happening to his left. People converged on the run, their faces drawn in consternation.

Supper came late that evening, and Sheriff Keyes delivered it. "Brother Jeremiah died today," He explained. "He was on his way with your meal when he keeled over. They got his body to the resurrection machine, but the new soul isn't Jeremiah's. We've got another Indian on our hands. Our first soul was a Shoshone, you know."

Eli forked down his food. When he looked up the sheriff was still there. "Waitin' for somethin'?" the miner asked.

"Your plate. Anyhow, I'm curious. I never heard of a resurrectee just dropping dead."

"Mebbe that's what happened to Pilgrim Gladful. You said there'd be no artopsy, but if you look for a bullet, you won't find one. I'm no killer."

"So how'd you do it? What's this nimbus of misfortune that surrounds you? It's not your whiskey breath or Pilgrim John would never have survived to hammer on my door."

Eli pondered. "Mebbe it's the music. That, or the way my fiddle's tuned. I was playin' 'Nicolina' when Brother Jeremiah — died. It's a melody I picked up a year back, though I ain't quite got the hang of her yet."

Sheriff Keyes collected the plate and fork. "I'm going to pull up a chair and watch over you tonight," he said. "The Bible Society's pretty riled. By accident or not, it seems you've killed two of their resurrectees. If I was them, I'd be scared of you worse than any monster."

"Look, tell 'em I'm sorry and give 'em my fiddle —"

"It may come to that," the sheriff conceded. "Still, I wouldn't disarm myself quite yet. Let's weather the night first."

The sheriff settled in front of the door. Eli moved to the iron slab and rapped for attention. "Sheriff? I ain't had nothing to drink all day."

"Keep on your toes. Somebody's just left the chapel, and he's coming this way."

Eli groaned. His body was bubbling over with a nervous energy he found difficult to control. His hands shook with palsy. He dropped to the floor to do pushups, hoping to fatigue himself and stave off more violent spasms.

"Twenny-two, twenny-three —" Eli counted.

The cell door opened. An impressive figure in his top hat and garrick, Professor Spiegel pointed with his stick. "Bring your violin."

Eli scrambled to his feet. "Where we goin'?"

"I mean to establish the grounds of your defense," Professor Spiegel answered. "I have equipment to measure sound frequencies. If your instrument produces the right harmonies, I'm ready to testify that Pilgrim Gladful and Brother Jeremiah died accidental deaths."

Sheriff Keyes nodded. "Come along, Eli. You'll have a chance to look at the professor's machine."

Their destination was a hardware store when Larsonville boasted six thousand citizens. The floorboards creaked as the three men passed through the front room. But for shelves, counters, and a black-framed daguerreotype of President Garfield, the place was empty. Spiegel led them down a corridor and unlocked his door. He lit a lamp and drew the curtain veiling his invention.

The resurrection machine consisted of six vertical frames, thrusting several feet into the room. Inside the frames stood a series of capped pipes, each connected to several others by flexible tubes. The result was a crisscross maze of rubber hoses dense enough to obscure the housing below a few thickly greased rods.

The professor pointed to a foot bellows. "That's what powers the mecha-

nism. We lay the body on this table and strap the mask over the face. During the first phase of operation the errant soul is removed. Under these conditions a freshly evacuated body attracts new occupants, male to male and female to female."

"An' most Americans."

Spiegel nodded. "Souls cleave to their own land and time. That's what my evidence suggests."

"So why don't the fool sneak back into his own body?" Eli inquired.

"Shock?" the professor speculated. "Maybe our next resurrectee will be an erstwhile subject, and I'll find out. I doubt it, though. More than likely he'll not remember his afterlife experiences."

"I'm curious about a number of things," he continued. "As regards Brother Jeremiah's death, did you know we had difficulty finding him a new soul? Does that mean twice-dead bodies are less attractive to the spirits, or is it something to do with the horrors of your music?"

Eli grinned. "Them spirits, I caught 'em with their pants down. No trial to warn 'em. No time to git someone ready for life."

Spiegel hung up his hat and rummaged in a gloomy corner. He returned to the table carrying pieces of a curious device — ear trumpet, gauge, paper scroll, and wires. "I'll be a while assembling this," he warned. "You might get out your violin."

Eli studied his trembling hands. "I need a swaller of whiskey. I'm not sure I kin play like this."

"Sheriff?" Spiegel said, turning to Keyes.

Sheriff Keyes nodded and left the room. Spiegel listened to the creaking floorboards and gestured for Eli to step close.

"This is what lawyers call a privileged conversation," he whispered. "We're going to make a deal."

"What's that?" Eli responded.

"I'll save you from the gallows. For your part you'll rescue me from the mess I've created here in Larsonville."

"Mess? You got it good —"

"That's what I thought. Imagine, a community broad-minded enough to let me use its criminals in my experiments! And when my resurrectees began the Bible Society, I was pleased. Folks might have decided they were monsters, but it's hard to get aroused against people who preach the Word of God. What they did insured their survival."

"So what's wrong?"

The professor bent close. "They *are* extraordinary, these creations of mine. It's inevitable that people treat them as either angels or devils. That's the problem, folks idolize them. Their converts are too ready to give them all they ask for. 'Pride cometh before a fall.' I'm convinced they're not really angels, just sinners like us. No, let me hedge on that. They're more than us in one way, more inclined toward group action. That's got me . . . well,

scared. I've associated with them more than anyone, and it's come to the point where they frighten me.

"The Bible Society was their way of protecting themselves, but now it's become powerful. With all the property abandonment around here, they've become zealous in accumulating land and buildings. Soon Larsonville will belong to them."

"Yeah?"

"You don't understand. Resurrectees don't have our respect for life. If they had their way, we'd hand out death sentences for spitting in public. Half the people who left Larsonville this spring did so because they were afraid of what this town's becoming."

"I figgered you was on their side, you an' Sheriff Keyes."

The professor nodded. "God willing they'll reckon so, too. They're a credulous lot. Appearances deceive them."

Eli heard the jingle of the front door. "What kin I do?" he whispered hurriedly.

"They might have dispursed, left Larsonville and the Society to return to normal. Now it's impossible. They'll never take the chance of encountering another fiddler of your — caliber. No, after your trial they'll think in terms of a refuge, a place to themselves —"

The sheriff opened the inner door and entered, carrying a bottle of whiskey. Eli grabbed it, took a deep swallow, then handed it back. "Thankee," he gasped. "You better keep it."

Professor Spiegel cranked up his device. Paper scrolled over the rollers. He nodded, and Eli started to play. The arrow in the gauge bobbed erect, and six needles scratched out zigzag lines. The professor winked. "All right, we've got enough to flimflam every judge west of Denver."

"I'm better at 'Red River Valley.'"

"Spare us, and the sheriff might let you have another drink."

Eli shook his head. "Nossir. I drunk me enough whiskey for ten lifetimes. I mean to stay near sober till my trial's over."

The sheriff's whiskey bottle was not yet empty when Judge London rode into town on Tuesday. London used the morning to clear the docket. Eli's trial began later in the day.

By supper he was acquitted. The sheriff escorted him past a crowd of scowling spectators. "You're not popular," Keyes muttered. "Best lay low. I'll ride you back to your cabin."

"Spiegel's the one they hate. He betrayed 'em by speakin' in my behalf. The poor feller was shakin' when you led him out."

"The professor's safe. Who else can fix his soul machine when a hose pops loose? You should see it when someone's pumping the bellows; all flapping rubber and rattling pipes — a wonder it holds together long enough to do the job."

They rode out of town together. "What happens now?" Eli asked. Sheriff Keyes shook his head. "If I was you, I'd sell out. There's gold in Dakota."

"We got gold here, too."

"Keep thinking that, and you'll find yourself face down with a bullet in your back. Two grocers left in Larsonville, and neither's going to sell you flour."

A shot rang out. Hastily, the two men swung from their saddles and scrambled into the brush. Other guns blazed from up ahead. "We're surrounded?" Eli gasped.

Sheriff Keyes pointed toward town. "Enemies." He looked uphill. "Friends."

"You knowed we'd be targets! You sent for help ahead of time."

"Keep your head down. Them's my Silverton deputies up there, and we won't be safe until they work past us. Give 'em a chance to do their job."

"Whatcha think? Them below's gotta be converts. They ain't res'rectees or they'd be skeered I'll take out my fiddle —"

"Hear any more shots? Resurrectees is a good bet. Soon as they saw they missed, they pelted out of earshot."

Eli mused over the events of these few days. "You know, Perfesser Spiegel, he ast for my help. He's skeered of the Bible Society. The thing is, I cain't figger out what he wants me to do."

"Let me give you a hint. If he asked you and not me, there's something I can't do for him."

"After a day in court, all I want is to keep shy of trouble."

Sheriff Keyes sighed. "Consider the record of your trial. Within the week every authority in this territory will know how easy it is to kill resurrectees. In Larsonville they've persuaded folks they're holy, yet they've made enemies. What would *you* do if you were Pilgrim John?"

"I'd take off for parts unknown. I'd plug my ears and steer clear of my feller man."

"Remember this, though. These folks are used to acting in concert. They will vote and leave as a group. Chances are they'll take Professor Spiegel and his machine with them. That's not a fate he looks forward to."

"Cain't you stop 'em? If Spiegel asks for yer protection —"

"I'd tell him to wreck his soul machine and leave Larsonville. I'd settle him in a remote camp and post gunmen to protect him. I'd find a perfectly awful fiddle player and ask him to spend every waking moment playing 'Nicolina.'"

"Well for God's sake, I'd be willin' to do that! The feller saved my life! Why cain't he stay with me?"

Sheriff Keyes laughed. When they reached his cabin, Eli found out why. Rifle in hand, Professor Spiegel stood at the door to welcome him home. "The deputies will be back soon," the sheriff remarked. "Meanwhile, why

don't you play us a few ditties? I'll stay right outside."

Eli scratched out his repertoire while Spiegel made cornbread. Keyes rapped on the door, and his fiddle fell silent. What a relief to his arms! Pick-and-shovel strength was useless when it came to wielding a bow.

A deputy led his horse out of the woods. Keyes exchanged words and the deputy left. Five minutes later he returned with Pilgrim John. "Don't play your music," John pled. "You'll kill me!"

Eli stepped forth. "Why should you fear death?"

"Your death is real. Brother Jeremiah, Pilgrim Gladful — they'll never live again."

"You tried to shoot me."

Pilgrim John cast from one face to another, but failed to read the message he sought. "I — it wasn't me. Some of our converts, not firm in godliness . . ."

Professor Spiegel emerged from the cabin into the shadows of early night. "It takes practice to tell a good lie."

Pilgrim John flushed with anger. "You abandoned us. We've served your purpose; now we're discharged to make our way in the world. You might have risen to a sense of obligation toward those who considered you a member of their special family. God gave you the chance."

"God?" Sheriff Keyes interjected. "The God who tells us to forgive our enemies?"

"Why not?"

The sheriff squatted to clean his boots. "Because in your greed for bodies, you find it unnecessary to forgive poor Eli, a harmless misanthrope . . ."

Pilgrim John began to sob. "We resurrectees fear death. Is that so hard to understand? Now Professor Spiegel and Mr. Littlejohn stand together. Between them they've the power to kill us all. Why shouldn't we be desperate? Why shouldn't we muster to surround this camp —"

"Eli, get your fiddle," the sheriff hissed.

"They're at a distance," Pilgrim John hastened to add. "I can, uh, impel them not to attack."

"Do you expect us to believe that?"

Pilgrim John turned to Professor Spiegel. "Tell them," he urged. "Tell them how you found your soul machine."

"Found?" Sheriff Keyes repeated.

"It was a miracle, and we're children of the miracle, capable of miracles. That's why it was arranged we should come back to life —"

Spiegel stepped forward and hugged Pilgrim John to his bosom. "How I hoped what you said was true, all those times you preached! How I troubled myself for you! You were my children, and I was someone chosen by God!"

"Yes, Sheriff. At night, a shooting star. The next day I went into the hills and found a heaven-sail of marvelous fabric, lighter than tissue. On the sail were pictures: how to assemble the equipment that lay beneath. All I added were the bellows and hoses, for things that could not endure the fall from

heaven were merely suggested."

Sheriff Keyes's eyes shot to Pilgrim John. "Why should God send a machine to raise the dead? If He wished —"

"I wondered about that," Professor Spiegel admitted. "I asked those I resurrected. The first I had to teach English — the Indian, you know. The second was a fur trapper, not so difficult to deal with. After that they understood my questions. Yet I've always worried whether my inquiries steered them to say what I wanted to hear."

Light! A meteor streaked across the sky. Eli turned. "You seemed right sure when you talked to me. You knowed what they was, what they warn't . . ."

"I know less and less," Professor Spiegel answered. "I fear God had no part in this, except they were happy to preach and I was their first pair of willing ears."

Pilgrim John raised his hand, palm outward. "I speak the truth. My sort are better than yours. Your Bible commended standards of behavior we'd like followed. Our preaching turned Larsonville into a civilized city. Yes, we do not understand sin, nor lies, and we have failed to discover the threshold — gentlemen, you allow — what you expect —"

"He's fallin' to pieces," Eli whispered.

"There's one you lied to from the beginning," the sheriff growled. "Once Spiegel believed you, he helped you lie to the rest of us. Isn't that right?"

"No!" Pilgrim John groaned. "We're resurrected souls, that's true. Now professor's removed a crucial part of our — his machine to prevent us from perpetuating our kind, while Eli Littlejohn holds a weapon — we see in this plot to kill us off!"

"What do you want?" Spiegel asked.

"Give us what you took, Professor. We came into this world by your machine. If we leave the same way, our deaths will not be like those your fiddler inflicts. You shooting star — it was arranged to deliver supplements to the resurrection machine, not to replace the cz— . . . the . . . what you took."

"How do you 'arrange' these meteors? Did you arrange the first one?"

Pilgrim John fell silent, too distressed to speak. After waiting for an answer, Sheriff Keyes continued. "Tell us the truth about yourselves. Why are you afraid? Do you reckon we'll kill you? You've taken nothing from us, done nothing so extreme as to merit death —"

"Huh!" Eli exclaimed.

"Who are you?" the sheriff repeated.

Pilgrim John mastered his agitation. "We'd rather risk true death than answer your question. You should have feigned satisfaction, Sheriff. You should have made an effort to believe me. One thing is not allowed, that your world should know of certain possibilities . . ."

He craned expectantly, to hear a rattle of distant shots, a cheerful sound like firecrackers or popcorn.

"Larsonville!" Sheriff Keyes blurted. "Eli! Your fiddle!"

The deputy grabbed Pilgrim John. For three notes the resurrectee spasmed; high E killed him. The distant firing continued.

"What is it? Who'd they be shooting in town?" Spiegel asked.

"Everyone," the sheriff groaned. "Women and children — Judge London among them."

"Oh God."

"They want us dead, anyone who'd ever witnessed your machine at work. Once we're gone and they figure out how to cope with fiddlers like Eli, they will be back again. That's what's at stake here."

"We've got to get there. We've got to help!" Spiegel exclaimed.

"Our first business is to deal with this ambush Pilgrim John warned us about. Deputy" the sheriff called.

They took half an hour to descend a quarter mile, then despite themselves the group stepped up the pace. Holding his violin overhead, Eli slid down an arroyo. The professor caught him and nodded. He began to play.

Bullets from every direction! A hornet's nest! Why didn't the ambushers die?

Converts! Poor ignorant converts, never suspecting that back home their families had been sacrificed to keep Pilgrim John's secret. Yet the music was having some effect. What had been a multitude was now only three guns.

Sheriff Keyes slid by. "It's dark. Any luck, and we'll get past 'em. Put your fiddle down and we'll steal by."

God, for a swallow of whiskey! Eli nodded and tailed the sheriff as they scrambled among wet rocks, waded a section of Cougar Creek, and climbed back toward the trail. "Should I play again?" the miner puffed.

"Where's the professor?"

"He was behind me before all that gunfire —"

"We got to get to town. He'll have to take care of himself," the sheriff interrupted.

The sky lightened. False dawn, when humankind is most sluggish and the world seems strange and new. Larsonville was strange indeed: a section of Main Street was in flames. Four shadowy figures occupied themselves by dragging bodies toward the burning chapel. Eli looked. The sheriff nodded and he made ready. Friend or foe? The music would tell them all they needed to know.

As the strains of "Nicolina" sang out the figures wheeled and ran. Sheriff Keyes fired. The shot startled Eli: he paused. The pause extended, for the resurrectees put on a ghastly performance, whirling and twitching, dancing among the ruts of the street.

"Finish them off," the sheriff spoke.

"They might talk now," Eli objected without passion. "They won't have the mind to lie."

"Kill 'em," the sheriff repeated.

Eli played high E. The frenzy ceased. He looked around. "We'll have to clear the town house by house."

"They'd send men to find the second meteor. One team to do that, another to tidy up the bodies — a third to ambush us. If they'd any left, they'd post a guard around what remains of Spiegel's machine."

But they found no one in the hardware store. "What now?" Eli asked.

"Wait. They'll be back."

Eli found whiskey and drank himself into somnolence. The sun was well up when he woke. "Sheriff?"

"Nothing," Keyes croaked. His eyes were red from smoke and fatigue.

"They ain't comin' back," Eli remarked. "They got some way of talkin' at a distance. Them we killed failed to report. The rest hared off."

The sheriff scratched his chin. "If I wasn't so tired, I'd have figured that out." He sagged. "We've lost, then. There'll be more shooting stars."

"Mebbe."

"I'm tired of these *maybe's*."

"We made things hard on 'em. Why wouldn't they go where pickin's are easier?"

In the other room the front door jingled open. Sheriff Keyes lurched to his feet. "Hello?" Professor Spiegel called. "Hello? Don't shoot!"

"Are you alone?"

"I am." Exhaustion graveled his voice as Spiegel explained. "They shot me up in that ambush. Took the master valve and left me for dead. Then after a time they came back and patched me up."

Eli crept from the resurrection room and helped the heavily bandaged scholar stagger to the rear of the store. "He's alone all right," he told the sheriff. "Don't look too bad, neither. Nice an' tidy; no color, though."

"I must be out of blood. Gallons . . ."

"I reckon we saved your life," Sheriff Keyes spoke. "We took up shop here. They needed you to parley us out."

Spiegel coughed. "That's right. They don't dare come into town."

"Why do they *want* to?" Eli asked.

"Because — because this machine, and the one they fetched last night, and the comet where their souls are kept — that's all they've got. They're ten thousand years from home, and they don't have the fuel to go on from here, nor spare equipment — it's like crossing the desert and getting down to your last canteen, and then the mule dies."

"What is this? Are they begging us to let 'em continue this — this *invasion*?" the sheriff asked.

"No. They just want to go up, back into storage."

"That don't seem likely," Sheriff Keyes commented.

"Time doesn't pass for them up in the ether, so why not? They figure someday our great-grandchildren will learn to fly up past the moon and find their mausoleum, and then they'll wake them up. They say they're willing

to wait. The impatient ones weren't to start with, but they've learned their lesson, and now the leaders of that faction are dead. They wanted to take over part of our world, and make it theirs without our permission, but the survivors are willing to play things our way."

"Goddamit, they killed hundreds of people! The way we play things, they're going to jail!"

"They aren't human, Sheriff. They aren't bound by our laws."

"If they can dicker, they're bound by laws. What is it, Professor? What are you leaving out? Why do they think they can get what they want? How many are left?"

"Eight," answered Spiegel.

"And we're the only folks in the world to know the secret of Eli's fiddle. The only three I'm sure are left alive. Eli! Run! Get out of here!"

Eli's jaw dropped as the sheriff bolted for the door. "What about the per-fesser?"

"Get your fiddle! Shut him in! Damn it, I mean NOW!"

Moments later the two stood puffing in the sun. "What was that —?"

Keyes caught his breath. "You think they let Spiegel come here to *parley*? What secrets might they have hid under his bandages without his knowing? Now give us some music, and play *loud*!"

As Eli raised his bow, Keyes spoke again. "Something that dropped from the sky — that machine'll be hard to get rid of. Can't blow it up . . ."

Eli paused. "Footsteps. I hear the per-fesser draggin' this way."

"Damn. He don't know any better." Sheriff Keyes turned to shout. "Spiegel! You've been booby-trapped. You're a danger —"

BOOOOOM!

Eli woke, half-buried in splintered boards. He groaned and pushed up onto his knees. Blood dripped from a wound in his scalp, a lumpish mess of hair and coagulation. He needed a drink.

Flies buzzed in the bright summer sun. The miner stumbled to his feet to distance himself from their festering feast. Was that the sheriff they were swarming around? Who were these others?

Augmented by a heat-blackened sphere, Professor Speigel's machine lay off-center in a circle rimmed by detritus. Around its greasy cylinders were heaped a pile of bodies. Eli tried to remember. Something about resur-rectees? He shrugged. Events danced on the edge of this memory, and when they assembled into proper order, all this would suddenly make sense.

But for now, he *really* needed a drink.

An hour later, Eli sloshed back to the scene. "Git," he spoke to a sniffing dog, but not very loudly. His head still hurt.

He looked around. A wagon. Horses! The poor mares stood harnessed, too weary to be unnerved by death and wisps of smoke. He ought to free them, but first —

First, he dragged the bodies of various pilgrims into the wagon, then uncoupled the cylinders and threw them in on top. They had to be destroyed, didn't they? That's what the sheriff had said. Destroy all this strange stuff — except he didn't know how to do it. Machines that could survive a blast . . .

Then he fed the horses, still in harness. "Sorry, but I cain't let you two run off," he apologized as he led them to a watering trough.

He loaded the driver's box with whiskey, flour, hominy, beans, and lard. The wind began to shift. Smoldering ashes scattered across the furrows of Main Street, glowing with new life as Eli grabbed the animals' reins and walked out of Larsonville, uphill toward his cabin.

On the way he started to whistle, but "Nicolina" stirred uncomfortable ideas. Better not wake any ghosts before they were rightly put to rest.

Eli trudged beyond his cabin to the mouth of the mine. Inside lay a right-hand passage that had never paid off, and never would. He carried the stiffening bodies in, and then the pipes. Then one by one he removed the support beams and braces — pieces of timber he could use elsewhere.

The roof fell in. Dust billowed from the mine. The horses nickered when Eli emerged from the haze. "Hush up, girls," he croaked, trembling with fatigue. "I'd set you free, but you'd fetch home, and from the looks of it climbin' up, there's not gonna be nothin' left of Larsonville soon but smoke an' ashes."

Something in these words drew up a dread vision: Eli saw himself testifying before judge and jury. Memory, or premonition? He grimaced, rubbed his grizzled chin, and gave the mares a wink. "An' if anybody asks what happened there, we don't know nothin'. Larsonville? Never heard of the place!"

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PANDERING AND EVASIONS

by Gregory Benford

ESSAY

Gregory Benford is a professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine. And when he's not busy doing theoretical physics, the author writes fiction. His next novel, Great Sky River, will be released in hardcover edition by Bantam Books in November. This novel is the third in a series that includes In the Ocean of Night and Across the Sea of Suns, both recently released in paperback editions from Bantam Books.

Take a look at the SF and fantasy portion of a typical bookstore. Two themes leap out at you, two totally different perceptions of the world.

First, there are books with covers done in subdued colors. Many browns and greens, often leafy bowers. Unicorns and dragons, magic wands and characters in conglomerate robes of the Middle Ages. As a variant, often there are slightly clad women brandishing swords or taking dominant body postures. *Fire and Hemlock, Where Dragons Lie, Taming of the Forest King, The Darkest Road.* I've taken these titles from one month's advertisements.

Brand type: Faery Glamour.

Then there are the covers with stark color contrasts. Gleaming spaceships hang against a tapestry of stars. Angular shapes, rigid perspectives, metallic sheens. Squarish figures, often helmeted, stand in confrontational poses. From a recent month: *Cobra Strike!, Fortress, Imperial Stars, Dawn for a Distant Earth* (volume 1 of *The Forever Hero*), and *There Will Be War*, vol. IV.

Brand type: Technoempire.

The purpose of such similar packaging is the glossing over of differences. Rather than stressing the unique

approaches of writers, it pushes the promise of shared rewards. It whispers — actually, shouts — to the reader, *Remember that book you liked last month? Well, here's another like it!*

Want the delights of medieval tapestry, swords, magic, cute critters, and pauper-to-prince romanticism? Buy this!

Lust for images of a fresh, metallic, preferably American empire among the stars? C'mon here, kid!

What's wrong with these pictures?

As Brian Aldiss incisively pointed out in his analysis of SF, *The Trillion-Year Spree*, they pander. They reflect the blind spots of our time. They evade human realities.

And they unintentionally tell us something about ourselves. Whatever the merits of the books whose titles I picked above — none of which I've read, alas — what interests me most is the general texture of both marketing and writing, here in the mid-1980s.

We have a rather narrow path to follow in speculative fiction. We all know the usual jibes hurled at us. Escapism. Mindless fantasy. Kiddie adventures among the stars. Cartoon myths and cardboard characters.

There *was* a time in the late 1960s

and early 1970s when these clichés were less popular among the lit'ry establishment. Many of us felt the genre was going to grow and receive critical examination befitting its grand themes and increasingly complex execution.

Fond hopes! We got half our expectations: our market share increased. Some feel the explosion of SF popularity was and is driven mainly by the blockbuster movies and *Star Trek*.

If so, then that association in many people's minds with simpleminded, often militaristic adventure may be what hampered our critical reputation.

All this we must now live with. I think we should be doubly aware of how the spirit of the times affects our work, and where we're headed in American literature generally. Let me take, then, two themes that seem to me often damaging in fantasy and SF, and try to see where they come from.

Fantasy and Escape

Though I have never been a big fan of fantasy, I have always respected its greatest works, its long and honorable tradition. My first published story was fantasy.

Of late, though, I've been disturbed by the gradual intrusion of fantasy values and methods into science fiction. I surmise this comes about from a certain intellectual shift among writers, and also because the market for fantasy-like works is stronger. Overall, I'm opposed to it.

Norman Spinrad once remarked to me that it was harder to write good SF than good fantasy. SF must *create* a suspension of disbelief in the mind of the reader. Fantasy *requires* this as an initial investment from the reader. For the harder work in SF you can, at least in principle, get a larger return: an engagement with the world that means

something to the reader because he's helped build that world himself.

Nancy Springer has suggested a reversal of Spinrad's observation; she proposes that *bad* fantasy is easier to write than bad SF. This is because the elements of bad fantasy — the liberal arts misremembered, ignorant archaic diction, promiscuously misrepresented archetypes — are a lot more accessible to the ordinary college graduate than the elements of bad SF (sloppy reasoning, conflicting technologies, wrong facts). Whatever the precise rule, many more people these days seem to want to write fantasy which mixes in pseudoscientific elements. It is not fantasy I deplore, but the unnecessary blending of fantasy into SF and vice versa.

I suspect the reason many people like fantasy is that it springs from the wistful hope that we can impose on the world a *human program*. It anthropomorphizes evil into the stock images of the vampire, werewolf, Frankenstein's monster, etc. It anthropomorphizes nature by introducing half-human forms (faeries), imaginary animals with the more unpleasant aspects omitted (dragons, unicorns), and by showing superhumans who can control the world with humanlike powers divorced from intellect (wizards, witches, warlocks).

Fantasy fearlessly faces the past. It calls us back to old beliefs and superstitions. Its central authority figure is the magician, whose power comes from ancient truths.

Fantasy is often the literary fossil of vitalism, that comfortable notion that the living world is really run by non-mechanistic forces we can comprehend readily, "naturally" — not in human intellectual terms (the program of science), but in terms of driving emotions and desires that are humanlike.

In the past twenty years, dating

roughly from the popularity of Tolkien, there has been a steady resurgence of fantasy as a publishing category. Let me simplify by treating the vast bulk of the fantasy resurgence, which seems to be psychologically naive. I'll ignore Stephen King-style contemporary work, too, because my caveats don't apply there. Most of what remains is heroic fantasy — the true backbone of the business. The rare exceptions, literary fantasy, are not the cause of the publishing revolution we've witnessed. Otherwise Peter Beagle would be rich today.

Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, conjectures that a lack of fairy tales in childhood causes a late-adolescent hunger for the fantasy of oversimplification. Perhaps so, but why does this generation need so much literary refuge? Well, note that the rise of fantasy parallels the increasing pressure in and on Western society.

This reinforces an intuition many of us have, that the appeal of it lies precisely in its harking back to the comfy knowns of our civilization's earlier days. The favorite refuge seems to be the Middle Ages, where one can turn the clock back against democracy, sexual permissiveness, mass culture, messy old machines (magic is always cleaner), and generally anything you don't like.

Fantasy thus has a great investment in the solidity of the past, and the natural world. This leads it to have the same high investment in an ordered narrative and essentially nineteenth-century methods of storytelling. Thus the writer of fantasy cannot afford to adopt a tone of epistemological mockery, or use ironic juxtapositions which call into question the whole meaning of literary action.

This is why fantasy is so deeply conservative and clings to the bour-

geois orthodoxy of narrative. It's no accident that the biggest fantasy publishing line is edited by that enemy of modernism in literature, Lester del Rey.

There is plenty of amusing fantasy, ranging from L. Sprague de Camp to Piers Anthony. The jokey, punning novels of Anthony have found a huge adolescent audience. I suspect they're popular because they combine a mildy derisive tone with a longed-for theme: the lost prince who'll show 'em all.

The dryly comic irre realism of Borges, Calvino, Barthelme, and others seems very nearly science-fictional at times, but fantasy cannot at root share this. Fantasy has a great stake in the old order, in the forest versus the city, in vitalism versus the machine.

Fascist Fantasies

All well and good; none of the above means that the recent fantasy boom is bankrupt or worthless. The genre is blessed by talents like Leiber and Lynn, Disch and Delany (though notice how atypical their works are). Occasional gems like Phyllis Eisenstein's *Born to Exile* shine forth.

Still, some consequences of the genre are rather restricting. Life in fantasy-land tends to be simplified to the point of a cartoon. Characters are reduced to mythic figures who do quite nicely without all those messy human voices of doubt, ambivalence, or subtlety. Evil loses because of the mightier sinews of the hero (or heroine), or else because it is, after all, *eeevil*, and good must conquer. This "internal rightness" that wins through is the true core of most fantasy. Good wins because it is good, period. In this sense the patty-cake zen of *Star Wars* is a fantasy-style element. (In fact, there is a suspicious similarity between the Force and the mysticism lying

beneath fascist rhetoric. An enormous amount of fantasy has this same emotional underpinning. So, too, does some dull-witted power-fantasy SF, as Spinrad devastatingly demonstrated in *The Iron Dream*.)

Of course, some advances in fantasy in this decade have introduced better characterization and some thought about social issues. For example, Elizabeth Lynn's work is cleanly written, and her people are well characterized. Janet Morris includes interesting, up-to-date science against her fantasy backgrounds. Nancy Kress has a deft, modern touch. Even in the best of this type of fantasy, though, I consistently get the odd feeling of a point of view suspended halfway between the imagined world and twentieth-century USA. I have yet to see a fantasy work with people as idiosyncratic in language and attitudes — as *alien* — as found in, say, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County.

What we lose in most ego-boosting fantasy is a vision of characters in new circumstances. To depict that requires not historical empathy or research, but imagination and thought. In realism, characterization has a reportorial purpose. In fantasy, this constraint is weakened. Thus fantasy that has as a partial purpose the treatment of sympathetic homosexuals, say, is defused by the penumbra of unreality that goes with the territory. (And for my money, anyway, the territory itself is often unreal *even on its own terms*. I grew up in the far back woods of Alabama, and I sense in many ostensibly rural fantasy works the sweaty imagination of a city author, sitting at his typewriter and wondering, *What does it feel like if. . . ?*)

Similarly, feminist fantasy tends to neglect the very real historical reasons why feminism was not a powerful force in the past. Agrarian cultures

usually stress muscle power, undermining the evolution of most notions of sexual equality.

Even more questionable are the Conan-like heroines. True, amazons did exist — but they were anomalies. Is this really a good way to discuss feminism? Aside from a temporarily refreshing example of female independence, what can we learn from these societies? No more, I suspect, than from Conan.

More important, all these methods of dealing with current social issues by casting them into fantasy environments are hobbled by a simple fact: the reader discounts the impact of such ideas because they lack a connection to the reader's own world.

Those florid, overwrought sentences, packed with superlatives and imagery, can be vastly entertaining, of course. But they carry a subtle message: relax, sit back, enjoy the view, be impressed but not informed. Don't struggle with a problem; let the writer do your thinking for you. What reader can honestly claim that his understanding of our future, or even our present (much less the people in it), was enhanced by the comfortable worlds of McCaffrey or Tolkien?

By contrast, in SF that uses the tenets of realism, the reader must ponder a perceived world and weigh it by his own values — not those of a traditional and agreed-upon fantasy world, encumbered by the trappings of the past.

Fantasy As Pollution

Okay, fine: these are the differences between the two genres. What bothers me is the oozing of fantasy values into SF.

Star Wars made the point visually: light swords, princesses, knights, the lot. It was tremendous fun, but it was

also antirational and cryptofascist.

In written SF, Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover series reads more like an alternate-universe Middle Ages epic, with psi powers thrown in, than SF. Anne McCaffrey's dragon series is ostensibly SF, with genetically manufactured dragons who can fly to the upper reaches of the atmosphere, are telepathic, and warm-&-cute, too.

More seriously, Philip José Farmer's Riverworld series is a self-contained system within which an infinite number of games can be played with familiar historical figures. The internal workings are consistent and well thought out, but it means nothing to us beyond an amusing problem. (Not, of course, that I decry amusement. I love it! And Farmer has shown that he can comment powerfully on many human facets, in his other works.)

There are many books that share this fascination with a hermetically sealed-off world, wherein characters stumble about, gawking at the wonders. There are cute creatures, enchanted landscapes, and nearly always a fascination with sheer size (as if enormity insured importance). John Varley's ingenious talent has run aground on this shoal, in his Titan series.

Of course, SF, too, has always been vulnerable to the charge of escapism. John W. Campbell felt that SF at its best was deeply antiescapist because it dealt with the underlying true nature of the world as revealed by nature's unyielding laws — laws society could choose to ignore only at its peril. To abandon the pursuit of rational behavior which uses natural law was, to Campbell, true escapism.

We can consider fantasy as a kind of metaphorical psychological laboratory, where we can find out what lurks behind the frontal lobes. But it's one thing to look at fantasy as a probe, and

another entirely to feel that telepathic dragons carry deep meanings for our lives. Science-fantasy often gives the impression of being tennis played with the net down. At first there is a burst of freedom, and many more things are immediately, easily possible. But after a while . . .

Fantasy can in principle maintain that its lessons and concerns are purely psychological. Science-fantasy cannot because it has stepped across the boundary into the real world. Beyond the playground of fantasy, literature cannot maintain that it is innately circumscribed or juvenile or inapplicable to modern life. Then the charge of true escapism can be used against it if it ducks the issues contained in the assumptions it uses — if it tries to play without the net.

Of course there are degrees of non-involvement with the unremittingly real world. Deep-space SF can seem to have only a thin connection with us. The Ringworld series verges on this, and shares some of the quality of an isolated let's-tour-the-big-object guidebook.

The difference is that Niven and the others are talking about the possible (though far-distant) consequences of real physical laws. Just as the constraints of the sonnet impose a possibility of excellence that (for my money, anyway) free verse doesn't have, so do the rules of sticking to real science make possible a greater success in the big-object subgenre. This is what distinguishes Ringworld from, say, the big, sprawling, smooth and familiar possibilities of Silverberg's Majipoor.

The most disappointing recent intrusion of fantasy elements into SF came, for me, in Joan Vinge's complex and interesting *The Snow Queen*. Early on in this Hugo-winner (1981), a crucial choice is made when Vinge

elects to make her *mers* creatures the object of senseless slaughter, all to make an immortality virus. Several scientific objections can be made to this plot element — it would be much more effective, for example, if the FTL-level culture simply bred *mers* and bled them for the virus. Apparently, Joan Vinge allowed the ordained plot structure — taken from a fairy tale — to dictate the science.

This is the essential posture of science-fantasy: trappings of science, which lend credibility, awash in the devices and thought patterns of fantasy. I'm afraid that, for me, this choice violates the constraints of logic itself, not merely scientific fact. This, together with that old assumption, the galactic culture coexisting alongside a feudal planet complete with swords, queens, etc. . . . well, it is hard not to see this as a set of unquestioned clichés combined with a basic decision which corrupts the rest of the narrative.

A more subtle fantasy-like intrusion is the unexamined assumption that liberal capitalism (or, more rarely, state socialism) will form the backdrop of societies centuries from now. This is now so automatic that it probably seems natural to even the most hard-nosed high-tech writers. Worse, there are even semifeudal regimes invoked in future high-tech societies. (I omit here, of course, books like Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Oath of Fealty*, which makes a specific point about the return of feudal forms because of a high-tech development.)

The usual excuse for such easy answers is that the author should be permitted them, in order to spotlight some personal or political point. Hogwash! The interaction of technology and society is a major piece of what SF is about in the first place; neglecting

this connection is playing with a stacked deck.

Interestingly, the group which seems most aware of the difficulty are the conservative hard-science writers such as Anderson, Niven, and Pournelle. I would like to see some writers on the left end of the spectrum present some fully-realized futures that fit the technology into a social matrix that is — of logical necessity — different from the standard models of the present (fascism, socialism, communism, capitalism). There are attempts, such as Neil Schulman's *Alongside Night* and Harry Harrison's *To the Stars* trilogy. We need more.

I realize this is a tall order, and so is the weeding-out of so many habits of thought we have all (I don't exclude myself) fallen into. But that is what SF is about: thinking about a future that is urban, diverse, technology-driven, and packed with ambiguities. It is easier to write about futures that, by their inclusion of fantasy elements and habits of mind, peer backward into a past that is rural, simple, monothematic, antirational, and primitive. But that betrays the promise of the field.

Science-fantasy is one way to veer from what seems to me to be the high road of SF and fantasy. But there is another, the flip side of uninspected "realism."

America As Empire

I've gotten a reputation for writing pretty heavy stuff sometimes, packed with scientific information, dense language, some fairly tricky allusions. So people come up to me and are obviously surprised to learn that I'm from southern Alabama. I grew up there, visit often, and consider myself a southerner despite having lived 24 years in California.

I guess the idea is that southerners

aren't often scientists, and probably move their lips when they read. Anyone from the South probably knows what I mean: when you start speaking with an accent of rounded, soft tones, people automatically deduct twenty points from your apparent IQ.

Of course, a lot of the time that's a learned response. Education traditionally lagged in the South. But some of it is a seldom-acknowledged remnant of that war 'way back there, the one the winners have mostly forgotten, but the losers don't, won't, can't. There has been much puffery about how Vietnam was the first war "we" lost, but nobody seems to notice that half the country lost, and devastatingly, 120 years ago.

That ringing, grand defeat still informs a great deal of a southerner's outlook. For though it was on the wrong side of history, the Old South was deeply beautiful, with a serene sense of values and connection to the land. The New South came into being partly as a heavy-handed foreign intrusion, an experience the rest of the country has not suffered. All mixed up in this collision of cultures was romance, gentleness, and order, right alongside sordid ugliness, cruelty and chivalry, wealth and culture. The South simultaneously got better and worse.

Rich ground. For all its culture and grace, the South gave little to literature until about 1920. Between 1930 and 1967, though, it produced 21 Pulitzer Prize winners, 8 of 24 New York Drama Critics' Circle winners, 9 of 32 National Book Award winners in fiction and poetry. William Faulkner capped this by winning the Nobel Prize. Such a rich outburst must come from some wellspring, and those grinding cultural tectonics were the source.

Nobody seems to have noticed that a

similarly burgeoning field reaped no benefit from the southern literary renaissance. SF is dominated by Nawth'n Cult'ral Imperialism.

As usual, there are several reasons. The South has fewer intellectuals, less science and technology, a certain quality of looking backward. Yet it has had a toehold on the future. The first expedition to the moon was launched from Florida (because of orbital economics, as Jules Verne understood a century before; go south and you get more outward sling from the earth's rotation).

There's also the simple fact that southerners spend more time on "interpersonal relations" (a typical nawth'n term). Thus much of southern literature got stuck with the label of Southern Gothic. You know: brooding ruins, green coves, melancholy characters hiding some purple secret beneath mossy oaks.

Any southern writer notices these facts immediately; doubly so if he or she writes science fiction. It took me over a decade to see it clearly as an issue. Once I began trying to integrate my boyhood upbringing in southern Alabama with the primarily northern outsider's view that lurks in SF, I noticed a lot.

I saw that SF is still dominated by the Heinleinian mold of always being about the winners, seldom the down-trodden or ordinary. Yet that is a strong strain in the life and literature of the South.

I realized that in SF the wilderness (the South) had gotten confused with the frontier (the West). The two mean completely different things to their inhabitants.

That cliché, "space — the final frontier!" applies to the first people who go there, but not to those who come after; to them it's a wilderness

with a spirit and essence they live in, not just trample over on their way to someplace else. (Frontiersmen don't found Sierra Clubs.)

I sensed, too, that attitudes don't change all that fast, yet SF doesn't know this. I think the field seldom uses its relation to our past and past literature to grow wiser. It persists in a kind of narrow ethnocentrism, primarily northern. (Even foreign SF shares this in some measure. Where they don't outright copy northern American attitudes, they impose their own northern European or northern Russian or Japanese blinders.)

So part of my education in SF has been to deal with this. When I see those shiny starships hanging above a lush virgin planet, ready to send carpetbaggers down, I think of nawth'n assumptions, and wonder if SF must take them.

Years ago I wrote a novel, *Against Infinity*, that opens and closes with the storytelling voice I heard my step-grandfather use around the fireplace in the 1940s. (My grandfather had died of lockjaw in the 1930s.) It specifically echoes William Faulkner's wonderful novella, "The Bear," comments on it, reflects on what it means about long-term human destiny.

I noticed early on that most critics have no glimmer that the Faulknerian style is a peculiarly ornamented version of a standard southern storytelling cadence and rhythm. The people I grew up with — laborers and fishermen, farmwives and hunters — told stories similarly. (And often; southerners *talk*.) They used long, rolling sentences, digressions, dodging in and out of several persons' viewpoints.

More, that storytelling voice plays a moral role, provides a social frame around the narrative. Little of this penetrates to SF, mostly because the

field is innocent of the past, and culturally isolated.

That's what's missing in America As Empire fiction: wisdom from our past. Knowledge of American literature itself. It is cut off from the counterbalancing, "un-American," and ironic experience of the South.

The leading advocate of militaristic fiction is surely Jerry Pournelle, who edits the *There Will Be War* series with John Carr. Pournelle served in Korea, was badly wounded there, and has written many novels about the military in the future. Born in Tennessee, he is no shallow tub-thumper, no jingoist. Yet the trend he has shaped has led to much uninspected war-in-space SF that seems innocent of Pournelle's historically grounded sense, and equally uninfluenced by Joe Haldeman's seminal *The Forever War* (1976). Pournelle often displays, like many southerners from military backgrounds, the zeal of the comparatively recent convert. For a century after the Civil War, the military was the prime respectable occupation left in an oppressed, impoverished South; that has obscured the deeper southern experience of submission to a different world view.

Why hasn't SF reflected this profound lesson? I believe the answer comes from SF's history in the US, its origin in a class of small-time intellectuals in the northeastern section, its addiction to technology. The prevailing expansionist ideology of the northern industrial states blossomed into the frontier imagery of SF, neglecting the southern conceptions of the wilderness. Faulkner has more in common with Thoreau than with, say, Brett Harte.

So SF has grown with an underlying feeling that history is something unpleasant that happens to other

people. The much-displayed hard-nosed realism of imperialistic SF is in fact a Nawth'n Cult'ral Value, *not* a universal.

Too often we SF writers see a limitless expansion into the stars, without challenge to some of the fundamental assumptions of the genre. Western values prevail, technology solves most problems, and the empire of rationality rolls on.

Lest my cranky complaining give the impression that I think the genre is trash, let me point out a writer under-noticed these days, who has always understood *both* these pitfalls. Poul Anderson's *The High Crusade* recalls Middle Ages verities without sentimentalizing them and simultaneously makes clever points about star-spanning empires. It's also a hilarious romp, without the thud-and-blunder clunkiness of much Empire SF.

Look Up, Not Back

Both the subgenres I've discussed here — fantasy as flight from reality, shoring itself up with nods toward scientific explanations, and America As Empire — reflect deep needs in the reading public.

Fantasy is too often the Lost Princess theme, without redeeming hard-nosed truths about what that adolescent dream means.

When it veers into science-fantasy, it muddies the water with fake science and worn-out themes descended from the Middle Ages.

Empire SF caters to a need for male bonding while belonging to a powerful, winning team.

All hark back to the past, but seldom intelligently. The empire hasn't heard about losing, and the science-fantasy types don't like to think about all those serfs who didn't get to be princess.

They all assume people will get no

wiser. *This* is the Literature of the Future?

How do we avoid the depressing cardboard sameness we see on the bookshelves these days? Look up, not back.

We must seek fiction that reveals thought rather than concealing it.

Those who write fantasy and wish to employ the heft and force of scientific props should take care to *get it right* — to earn the credibility that science lends to SF. They should also cock a wry eye at the sentimental visions of a comfy past that fantasy often offers. The *real* past was a dark, oppressive, benighted place, not a bucolic playground for faerie.

Similarly, writers who sing of empire had better examine their assumptions. The solar system is a vast place, with radically different environments. Does the reflexive analogy to the old European empires, with their imperial fleets and rural colonies of docile natives, make any sense?

Comic book Marxist economic analyses of empire have failed to predict, for example, the modern "empires" of commerce, such as the American and emerging Japanese networks. Surely the distances and utterly different living conditions of the solar system will generate new kinds of economic and military forces, new modes. Working those out could prove truly stimulating SF, not just more lasers-in-space epics.

These two subgenres satisfy different sorts of readers. I certainly don't say they should be pushed aside with a superior sneer. But if a specialized audience is to grow and mature, the fiction must develop fresh insights. Else the vein will peter out, and the entire genre will be the worse for that.

Being rigorous and creative is a high cause we can all join in. Let's do it. ●

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

by Carol Deppe

art: Roger Raupp



Several years ago Carol Deppe volunteered the information that she wasn't a writer, that she hadn't attended any workshops or anything of this nature, and that she wasn't working on a novel. None of these data, however, are true anymore.

To: Norman Plaut
From: Vox Intergalactic Collections Agency

Dear Mr. Plaut,

According to our records, you owe Carlos J. Rao, our client, an apology. What have you got to say for yourself?

Sincerely,
Glyzrok Vox

To: Henry Segal, Private Detective
From: Vox Intergalactic Collections Agency

Esteemed Colleague:

Thanks for your help with our background investigation. When Alexander Gilman, our client, told us that everybody owed him letters, we nearly gorfed our cud.

What a relief to find out that only five or six other humans owe our client letters! We thought we were going to have to dun all 19.3 billion inhabitants of Earth.

Tell us more about this phenomenon you call "exaggerating."

Sincerely,
Glyzrok Vox

To: General Richard Winklemeier, Chief of Staff, USAF
From: Vox Intergalactic Collections Agency

Dear General Winklemeier,

Intergalactic collections agencies negotiate and enforce all debt collections and restitutions. They thus perform a variety of functions that were conducted by separate organizations and institutions on Earth: collections agencies, arbiters, public prosecutors, lawyers, judges, juries, police, army, etc.

We're sorry you didn't realize the implications of the fine print when Earth joined the Intergalactic Trade Alliance. You are correct in your conjecture that all Earth collection agents, lawyers, police, and USAF chiefs of staff are now "out of business."

We don't agree with your comment that "that's an awful lot of power for just one organization." There are many thousands of intergalactic collections agencies. We have enforcement power, but it's rarely used. Any ICA endeavors to get both sides of every story and to negotiate solutions that are

at least acceptable, if not agreeable, to all concerned. Further, the contractor always has the option of having his own ICA negotiate for him.

Unfortunately, we really aren't equipped to handle very many displaced people. Undoubtedly, some of you will be able to retrain yourselves and become employees of the established ICAs. Some of you may even start your own ICAs once you become sufficiently familiar with intergalactic collections practices.

I've enclosed a micro of a book I hope will be of some assistance.

Sincerely,
Glyzrok Vox

Enclosure: *So You Want To Be an Intergalactic Collections Agent*

To: Jennifer Boniface
From: Vox Intergalactic Collections Agency

Dear Ms. Boniface,

Martin MacKenzie, our client, claims that he took you out in good faith, that he spent \$93 on you for entertainment and comestibles, and that you owe him.

We aren't exactly sure what it is you owe him. It doesn't seem to be \$93. Our Intergalactic Collections Handbook doesn't cover this situation, either.

We think we're in over our tentacles.

What do you think?

Sincerely,
Glyzrok Vox

To: Carol Deppe
From: Vox Intergalactic Collections Agency

Dear Carol,

Certainly we're willing to handle your problem. The Vox Intergalactic Collections Agency handles *any* collection or restitution problem, no matter how large or small.

What is "science fiction"?

How many paper clips?

Which editors?

Sincerely,
Glyzrok Vox



RECRUDESCENCE
by Leonard Carpenter
art: Janet Aulisio



For those readers who enjoy a combination of horror and science fiction, here's another intriguing tale by Leonard Carpenter, who presented us the horror tale "Fearing's Fall" in the September 1987 issue of Amazing® Stories.

Leonard lives in Santa Maria, California, with his wife, Cheryl, and his two daughters, Amanda and Candace.

re-cru-desce (re' kroo-des') *intransitive verb.* To break out afresh after a period of latency or relative inactivity; to become active again, as a disease.

My involvement with Lease Tract 102 began after exploratory drilling had already commenced. I was just finishing final grades when I got a phone call from Jean Hinchcliffe, a former student of mine employed aboard the pilot platform. She wanted a university paleontologist's opinion; her scientific curiosity was aroused by what the drill string had brought up from eighteen thousand feet beneath the ocean floor.

"You really have to see the fossils yourself, Olin," she told me. "I'd be afraid to try to describe them over the phone, or tell you what I think." The hiss of static on the land-sea line made her sound much more distant than a few dozen miles up the California coast and out a dozen more across the choppy blue expanse of Pismo Bay. "Can you come up?"

"I really don't think so, right now. . . ." I hadn't been feeling very ambitious lately, so I groped for an excuse. But in fact it was the end of the spring quarter, and my calendar was empty. "Couldn't you just mail me a sample?"

"You aren't put off by my job, are you? I haven't abandoned life sciences for good, you know."

"Really? I'm glad to hear it." Frankly, it had irked me to learn that one of my best students was working as assistant geologist on an Exoco offshore rig.

"Just come on out. I could arrange a 'copter shuttle. Or else you could ride the crew boat from Port San Luis."

"Well . . . let's make it by boat. I like seasickness better than airsickness. Wednesday and Thursday, you said?"

"Oh, yes. That would be terrific! I'll have the office phone you back to confirm it." She said a hurried good-bye, and the line went dead, leaving me listening to rushing white noise that conjured visions in my mind of spreading sea foam on tossing waves.

I put down the phone, feeling a new flicker of interest in Jean Hinchcliffe. Even more tantalizing to me were her hints of new fossil life forms dredged

up from unexplored strata of the Earth's crust. I knew that my skills as a fossil-reading expert might be valuable to the oil company in its search for black gold, and I was wary of somehow being used to promote something I didn't agree with. Still, Jean's motive clearly wasn't profit, just scientific inquiry and friendship.

As I sat in my faculty office gazing out across the U.C. Santa Barbara campus at a small, priceless patch of shining Pacific framed by eucalyptus trees, I thought myself mature and world-weary. I imagined that I knew nearly all there was to know about the sea, the Earth's past, and the evolution of its life forms.

But soon I'd be learning just how pettily, pathetically ignorant I was. I'll never experience that smug, dangerous peace of mind again.

At sunrise on Wednesday I left Goleta and drove north on 101. At first the ocean scenery was obscured by cottony fog; it disappeared on the inland stretch of road, but still clung to the coast when I rejoined it at Pismo. It was just burning off, the sky shredding to a bright, wispy blue overhead, as I rolled into Avila Beach.

The tiny resort town, always fragile-looking and overshadowed by the tank farm on the hill, was suffering even more of an identity crisis with the arrival of the offshore industry. It had borne increased road and port traffic, but not yet the full impact on its beaches and air quality; the town's atmosphere still managed to seem rural and recreational. I drove around the small harbor to the company jetty where the crew boat was loading.

The cabin at the steel vessel's bow was already crowded with riggers, and more were loitering on the open deck among drums and pallets. The robust, weather-beaten men chatted and joked together with the gruff familiarity of members of an athletic team or a military unit.

I identified myself to the skipper, stowed my single bag in the rusted rack, and found a seat next to an amiable coffee-colored man who moved his gear aside for me. "I ought to hold this baby in my lap anyhow." He winked up at me, opening a flannel-wrapped bundle to reveal a massive new Penn deep-sea reel.

As the craft got underway, its powerful diesels thrusting us out past the pier and the anchored pleasure boats, we carried on a disjointed conversation. His name was Lem, and his pet enthusiasm was fishing from the rigs.

"The company doesn't mind?" I asked.

"Not if it's on my own time." He had an air of country ease about him. "Not many of the fellas do it — but there's nothin' like the fishin' out there. All kinds of fish. Tuna, rock cod, bottom fishes, lots I don't know."

"I suppose the fish are drawn to the platform," I said, putting facts together in my mind. Even in tidal waters the open ocean can be more barren of life than a landlocked desert, and yet human activity can create an oasis there. The presence of fixed structures at tidal level for plants and animals

to take root on, combined with the release of waste nutrients, can attract a variety of organisms. That is, until the human activity that created it just as casually devastates it.

"Yes indeed, we got fishes out there like you never seen."

That had been part of my interest in the rig all along; I wanted to look at the ocean from that unique vantage and get an idea of the biological relationships that might be developing. Though drilling had begun only recently, the platform had been in place for several months during construction and fitting out.

"We must be getting near it now?" I asked.

All I could see, through the curtain of spray kicked up before the cabin ports, were different shades of blue-gray. As Lem and I talked, we were jolting across dark-toned sea, flying in the teeth of wind and waves, hurtling toward a rampart of fog that appeared to the eye as solid as ancient granite.

But the fog bank must already have been receding; Lem nudged me and pointed as, over the passing of a few moments, the skeletal form of the *Daf-fodil* platform materialized out of the grayness: a cluster of large, bulky modular boxes perched atop ungainly jacket-legs, with derricks and cranes sprouting up crazily against the sky. The yellow-painted steel emphasized the odd resemblance of the structure to a giant robot flower in the midst of that desolate, blustery seascape.

As we drew near the platform, I began to grasp its true size, towering two hundred feet above the waves, and who knew how many more hundreds below. It was a guyed-tower type platform, mounted on a slender framework held tense and vertical by cables radiating from an invisible point underwater. Structurally a new concept, it was also the first rig in the recently opened Santa Maria exploration basin. Its nearest neighboring rig was almost a hundred miles southward, by treacherous seas, in the relatively calm channel off Santa Barbara.

The crew boat's diesels soon slowed, and we cruised into the shadow of the platform. Between its tubular legs, which were now incredibly massive-looking, I could see only a maze of structural underpinnings and pipes. The boat passengers began to stir and go out on deck in the spray-laden wind. The sea was blustery but not rough, rolling underfoot with long, stately swells. We disembarked by means of a slender gangway that flexed with the pitch of the crew boat. Beyond was a steep, railed stairway, an underslung fire escape zigzagging giddily up the cantilevered side of the rig. Most of the group of commuters made the climb silently and stoically, but Lem stayed with me to offer reassurance and answer my questions. He left me with a wave on the sheltered entry deck, where I found Jean waiting.

"Olin, hello! I'm so glad you're here." She skipped forward and squeezed my fingers in her two warm hands. Years had lent a comfortable fullness to her form, which I remembered as being athletic and boyish. She was dressed in slacks and a lab smock. The deep-sea tanned face, under the blondish

curls that fringed her safety helmet, made her eyes seem brighter and livelier than ever as they sought out mine. "You're looking as . . . professorly as ever! How's your family?"

"All right, I guess . . . I don't really know. They divorced me." I blushed. "That is . . . my daughter is married now, living on the East Coast. And my wife just remarried. So I'm . . . footloose."

"Oh, I hadn't heard." Her eyes flicked back to mine with genuine, pained sympathy. Abruptly, she gestured toward the older man at her side. "Olin, this is Blair Vincent, my lab supervisor. Blair — Professor Olin Simonsen."

Blair was a tall, slightly stout, curly-haired administrator type wearing black-framed glasses and a vinyl penholder stuck in the pocket of his white shirt. He clasped my hand officiously. "Glad you could make it, Prof! I think we can both learn a lot from what we've turned up. Here, see if this fits." He handed me a yellow hardhat identical to his own, right down to the black-on-red logo reading EXOCO and a plasticized security card clipped to the brim.

"How was your shuttle trip? Did you run into much fog?" Jean's chatty questions were answered gradually along the way while we deposited my bag in the tiny guest room and went on a quick tour of the platform.

From a windblown outer terrace we viewed one of the derricks, where grimy-gloved roustabouts wrestled enormous lengths of drill pipe into position on the mud-slimed floor. Beyond them, seen over the taut windscreens, the sea surface and atmospheric haze were blindingly bright. Inside the factory-like expanses of the rig, we walked through the production areas, forests and galleries of yellow-painted pipes and valves still pristine and unused. It was quieter there, but I began to feel like an insect crawling through a vast, vibrating machine — an impression that stayed with me as long as I was on the rig.

We passed by the vats and pumps that dispensed the drill mud, a viscous sludge forced into the well to maintain pressure and circulate debris back to the surface. Nearby was Jean's work area, where the drill cuttings were sifted, washed, and analyzed to get information about the subocean strata the drill bit was invading.

"It's all fascinating. How soon do you expect to strike oil?" My question was addressed to Jean, but in his officious way, Blair fielded it instead.

"In producible quantities, you mean? At five hundred feet per day . . . in three or four days, if we're lucky." He tugged at the bill of his hardhat. "Our first hole was dry, in spite of the drill ship's findings, but we've learned enough to be sure it's down there. Just a matter now of sniffing it out."

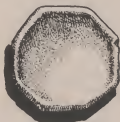
Jean added, "The first well was where we found . . . what I told you about on the phone. Can we show him now?" She looked up at Blair, whose smile seemed slightly indulgent. Then she took my arm and led me toward a door in one of the modular compartments.

The lab was windowless, but brightly lit; a little cramped, but well-

organized. Troughs and trays in its center contained rock samples, most of them labeled and arranged in sequence. More counters at the sides of the room held microscopes and other testing equipment. A blackboard on one wall displayed an unfinished chart showing earth strata lines and depth measurements. Jean walked to it and pointed.

"The strata are sheared and folded back on themselves here, you see. Consequently, we ran into similar deposits at different levels." She reached into a tray. "But I'm sure these were originally deposited in a single layer. Here, what do you think?"

She handed me a small, hard flake of rock. It wasn't more than three inches in length, and flat, a quarter-inch thick. It was formed or fractured in a distinctive, indented parallelogram or hexate shape that might be pictured like this:



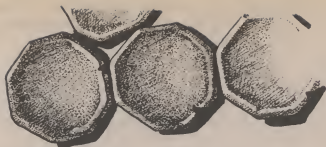
I examined it, a little nonplussed. "Well, it's not articulated, just a shape. If it's an organic fossil, I should think it would be a fragment of a larger animal or plant." I shrugged. "Most likely, it's just shale. You said there were others?"

Blair slid the tray toward me. "If you can explain it, you're sharper than I am."

The other stone chips in the tray were strange in only one way: they were exactly the same as the first — except for a few that appeared to have been cut or shattered by the drill tool. Bemusedly, I picked up two and matched them side by side.

"Uniform shape, uniform size. All relatively flat. Smooth, but they have a fine texture that could be organic." I looked up at Jean and nodded. "I can see why you believe they're part of a life form. Ordinary rocks wouldn't be so regular."

"Not unless they were crystalline — which these aren't. Or formed from cooling cracks, like a lava postpile." She leaned forward over the table. "But you haven't seen the most interesting thing." Working deftly, she arranged the stone pieces on the tray. When she'd finished, the angled corners were roughly meshed to form a mosaic pattern, thus:



"Why, that's remarkable," I told her. "Cooling or drying cracks would be hexagonal — but here's a unique, infinitely repeatable shape, and very regular. I can't imagine what conditions would produce it mechanically, can you? It looks almost man-made."

Jean flushed with an enthusiasm that mirrored my own. "They must be either bark plates or scales of animal armor, don't you think?"

"Possibly," I admitted. "What depth did you say they came from?"

"Between fifteen and twenty-two thousand feet." She moved to the blackboard and pointed to an area of chalk cross-hatching. "We're fairly sure they'd be from the late Mississippian period."

"Hmm. Probably vegetable," I said. It seemed to me that animal remnants would have been too rare to be turned up by random drilling — at least the remnants of such large animals. "If these were bony plates from one of the Mississippian armored fishes, the creature would have been longer than this room."

"That would be such a find!" Jean glowed. "But unlikely, I guess." She ran her hand wistfully over the contents of the tray.

"Have any other fossils been turned up in these fields?" I asked.

"Oh yes, these." She indicated a tray containing mottled fragments of stone with seashell imprints, and a few trilobites. "Nothing unusual." She looked up at Blair. "Still, we hope to get a better picture from the second hole. When we get near the same strata, we plan to take a series of core samples that will preserve all the layers intact. Don't we, Blair?"

"Yes . . . well, I think we could do that," he said, hovering a little closer over his assistant. "Of course, our work here is oil production. We can't always follow up on these biological sidelines, you understand." He glanced at me, then turned back to the sample tray. "But these little scales, widespread as they seem to be, could turn out to be valuable as an index fossil, to lead us to the oil."

I nodded; here it came, harnessed greed in action. "Have they been closely associated with oil pools?"

"Yes, they have. They were right on top of the trace deposits we tapped in our first hole." He gestured to some flasks of viscous black goo along the wall. "High-grade hydrocarbons, but not enough of it yet." He sighed. "I'd

hoped, Professor, that you'd be able to identify them right off the bat for us, and maybe tell us more about what kind of geological formations we're dealing with."

"Sorry. I'm afraid they're new to me." I smiled at Jean. "But I can try to research them back at U.C. And I'd definitely like to get a look at any new specimens."

After a good deal more technical discussion, Blair entrusted a couple of samples to me for study. Then he and Jean went off to catch up on their day's work, most of which was to be done in a large and bustling room down the hall. I spent part of the day trying to examine the samples with the equipment in the small lab, without any further success, checking in with Jean occasionally. Later I strolled about the platform as far as I could — though I was restricted largely to uninteresting areas by safety- and security-conscious personnel.

Finally, I sat in the employee canteen, sipping coffee and reading magazines. I was joined there by Jean at the end of her shift. Blair strolled in soon afterward.

The three of us talked.

To call the evening a disappointment would be to admit the foolish extravagance of the hopes I'd started to build up. Jean and I had never been more than teacher and student, and I had no reason to expect her suddenly to fall madly in love with me.

We chatted interminably over beers, she and I reminiscing about the university, she and he about their shorter mutual experience in the Exoco corporation. We stayed up late — remarkably so, in view of their twelve-hour shifts; nevertheless, I was the first to yield to fatigue and ennui. I insisted on retiring alone to my room; I left them talking together.

Once in bed, my weariness vanished. I lay there, brooding for hours before going to sleep. The perpetual noises of the drilling seemed much louder in the darkness, and I discovered that, in spite of their massive size, the great offshore platforms do stir and sway in the rolling night seas.

Next morning I cut my misery short and arose early. I dressed and went to the canteen to toy with some scrambled eggs — no sign of Jean or Blair. Then I packed, leaving my hardhat on the bed, and took my suitcase outside through the empty vestibule and down the hanging stair toward the boat platform. I still hoped to get a close look at what sea life I could, and I knew that the tide was low.

The fog was wet and dense, and the steel grids of the stairway were slick beneath my rubber-soled shoes. At each landing, the flights above and below me seemed to funnel off into oblivion. The sound of the sea and the loom of the rig's superstructure made me feel that I was in a vast, dark sea grotto. On the sloping stair, amid drifting fog, it seemed almost possible to forget from moment to moment which way was up and which down.

Finally, the dock materialized beneath me, and beyond it the rolling waves. I stepped off the stairs gratefully, though not to much greater security.

The platform was a rigid steel-mesh structure supported by cables, made to be raised and lowered with the tide on clanking vertical rails. Its sway wasn't that of the sea, but rather that of the platform above, and the effect was still disorienting. I had to stand there motionless a while to settle my stomach.

I could see one other human figure nearby in the fog — wearing a slicker, seated on a box, holding a fishing pole propped against the railing. When his head turned, I recognized Lem.

"Another early riser!" I called as I walked over.

"Early bird catches the worm," he told me sagely. "'Cept I'm usin' shrimps."

"Are they biting?" It was a rhetorical question, judging from the way the oversized gunnysack hung empty at his side.

"Always bitin' out here. Won't be long." He flicked a lever on his gleaming high-tech reel and let out more line. "You get to see your fossils?"

"Yes, indeed. Interesting ones." I told him a little about what I'd seen, trying not to launch into professorial detail.

"Hnnh." He gazed into the fog. "Y'know, a couple fellas quit the platform yesterday on account of those fossils. Two British fellas." He glanced sidelong at me. "Said they saw the same thing once at an onshore rig in Kenya."

"Really? Why would that make them quit?"

"Who knows?" He made a noncommittal motion of his head. "Could be there was some gas in that other well, caused a fire. Bad memories." He began to reel in his line. "Riggers got plenty o' superstitions, just like any other trade." He cranked in silence until his half-pound lead weight and naked, evil-looking twelve-ought hook rose dripping out of the sea.

While he was replacing his stolen bait, I moved on. The dock was too high to afford a close view of the water, but at its end was a descending stair blocked by a chain, with a sign reading **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**. Elated at the chance to flout authority, I stepped over it and climbed down to the lower level.

The frail catwalk took me near the main vertical members of the platform. I saw a number of things I found interesting: snails, mussels, kelp, an anchovy school, and glimpses of larger fish moving far below in the clear deep-sea water.

But it was something else that drew my attention forcibly: a fist-sized, flitting shape tossed momentarily up to the surface of a wave. Its appearance was familiar, yet preposterously out of place here. I moved as near as I could, knelt on the slippery walk, and grabbed for it — in vain. The rise and fall of the sea made it hard to judge the object's motion. I hooked my arm

around one of the railing supports and reached precariously out over the water to try again.

I knew I'd need tangible evidence if I was going to persuade anyone that I'd sighted a living, swimming trilobite.

With the size of the rolling swells and the swaying of the catwalk, I knew that I risked a wetting — but I wasn't prepared for the violent, clanging lurch of the metal structure that occurred then. It tore my grip almost loose, trailing me deep into water that, I later recalled, felt strangely warm. I was left clinging to slick metal by one hand and one leg. An instant later, a great splash somewhere nearby threw up a cascade that nearly dragged me under.

I struggled back onto the walkway and hauled myself upright — to find my frail perch damaged. The catwalk now sagged so that wave crests swept its entire length, and the railings of the boat loading platform ahead of me were mangled. Nevertheless, it was surely a safer position than my current one. I worked my way toward it, dripping, with the waves washing over my ankles.

As I mounted the short stairway, I thought of Lem, and I began to call his name. There was no sign of him in the radius of vision the fog allowed. My voice sounded weak and muffled. There'd been some heavy impact here, as I could see by the buckled floor grids and the damaged railings on two sides. A boat collision? If so, the vessel had appeared and sunk with impossible swiftness.

Near where Lem had been fishing, the rail was parted completely, its broken ends scraping the wave tops. I was drawn toward the breach by a humming sound I couldn't identify.

Then I saw the Penn reel lying at the edge of the platform, caught against an upright that now arched sharply back down. The spool of heavy fishline was still unwinding, whirring away patiently into the depths.

There was hardly any line left. Unthinkingly, I knelt, took hold of the reel, and pressed a catch on its stainless metal side. It stopped spinning. Instantaneously, the stout pole jerked out of my grasp, flicked overboard, and disappeared underwater.

My shocked, bemused mental state finally metamorphosed to fear. I gazed over my shoulder at the trail of devastation leading to where I stood, then I ran to the stairs and began to climb away from the sea — just as the first crewmen were nearing the bottom.

After careful and skeptical investigation, the Coast Guard's finding was the same one I'd reached: that Lemuel Jackson had been taken off the platform by the attack of some large shark or cetacean. Killer whales are capable of such a maneuver, launching themselves out of the water and over the top of an obstacle to carry off their prey. In this case, the creature had simply been huge and tough enough to do it by crashing through massive steel railings.

I was the only witness, though I'd seen little. The physical evidence told the story. But I'd been privy to certain details: the force of the strike, the immense splash as the creature reentered the water, the ease with which its departing speed whisked away Lem's fishing pole. Being in a more exposed place, I'd been lucky not to be the one killed. I could visualize it all; I even imagined I knew what Lem had been doing at the moment of the strike.

Baiting his hook.

Days after my return to Goleta, I was still unable to make any progress classifying Jean's fossil fragments. I threw myself into the task, partly to block out the anguish of Lem's death and my own near death. But all the university's vast repositories and archives didn't seem to hold the answer. At times, the object of the search seemed as illusory as my "trilobite" sighting — which by then I regarded as a mere embarrassing private mistake.

There were other emotions that turned my thoughts back to the rig. On the day of the tragedy, after my questioning, I'd spent a little more time with Jean Hinchcliffe. I realized that she might be open to a personal relationship after all. She was understanding and level-headed about my experience, and our talk hinted at the possibility of getting together socially later, ashore. Blair Vincent would be out of the picture, she intimated — in the company of his wife and three children.

I could see all too clearly the danger of placing my affections on one so much younger than myself, and I knew that some of what I felt must be energy rebounding from my divorce. Nevertheless, she was an attractive woman, and I was involved whether I wanted to be or not.

Her phone calls kept me informed of developments on the rig during the week: the repair and strengthening of the landing platform, the taking of the core samples, revealing more hexate fossil scales bedded together as she had predicted in a tight, mosaic layer; and, the presence of a rich deposit of crude oil just under this "capping" formation. The rig was readied for oil production, and Jean broached the idea of my making a second visit to study the new samples.

The tiff that resulted wasn't serious. Two people just getting to know each other are prone to misunderstandings. It all stemmed from my unwillingness to admit to Jean my newborn fear — my surreal, surreptitious unease regarding the sea and the platform, stemming from my recent experiences there. Jean somehow took it for mere stubbornness and was annoyed when I refused to discuss it further. On reflection later, I decided that was as good a time as any to cut our relationship short.

Whether I would eventually have found the nerve to visit her on the platform again, I'm not sure. Other distractions soon became more urgent.

It was on Saturday night that I saw a TV news item about an anti-oil demonstration in Avila Beach. The coverage was brief, and the protest looked relatively small for the town that had recently witnessed huge demonstra-

tions against the nearby Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant.

Still, I've learned to mistrust media coverage of protests, and this story struck a peculiar note.

As often happens at such affairs, a tiny, off-the-wall faction turned out as a sideshow to the main protest and received equal or greater TV coverage. A short visual showed a suntanned, puka-beaded spokesman fixing his gaze on the camera and rapping earnestly about "the sanctity of mineral deposits laid down in our planet's youth." He wasn't a bad public speaker, and I blamed choppy news editing for some of his incoherence. The piece ended with the mention of another rally to be held the following day, at the street entrance to the Santa Barbara harbor.

It was a strange echo of the concerns that had been keeping me busy the last few days. So it was more curiosity than chance that led my steps that way during my Sunday morning jog. The spot is a natural place for demonstrations, and it was a natural time to draw a crowd; the weather is balmy there most of the year, artists display their works along the palm-fringed sea front, and tourists, skaters, and cyclists promenade endlessly along the beach and pier.

Even so, the gathering, when I found it, wasn't large. It seemed to be only of passing interest to most of the strollers. Circulating in an orderly line were a few-score concerned citizens armed with picket signs and leaflets. The turnout included some U.C. students and faculty, some older local residents. Some dedicated-looking ones had obviously paid their dues as vibram-soled eco-activists, cleaning tar out of the plumage of sea birds during the big '69 spill. Their sloganeering was aimed primarily at laxness and high-handedness in the government leasing policy, with the personalities of the president and certain cabinet members looming large. Some of their literature bore the imprint of GOO, the local "get oil out" lobby.

Standing to one side was a clutch of pro-offshore advocates, who appeared largely to be industry employees and their relatives. Their ranks were thinner, but their pamphlets glossier. No hostility was evident between the groups, but a pair of extremely laid-back uniformed cops leaned against a nearby planter keeping an eye on things. I didn't doubt that more were waiting in the wings.

Finally, I spotted a familiar, lanky form, that of my colleague Peter Magnusson, bending over an Arctic jug behind the loop of pickets. I edged my way through the line, apologizing to the picketers, and clapped him on the back.

"Well, Pete, I'm glad to see you down from the Ivory Tower, to take a stand on the Relevant Concerns of the Day. Which side are you on, by the way?"

Wincing, he looked around and offered me a styro cup of water. "You've got to be kidding. You think I'd sit around and let those S.O.B.s auction off tidelands and fisheries to their financial backers without fighting it?"

I laughed. "I'd have to agree with you, I suppose." I sipped some water. "But are you against offshore drilling? Or just the administration's gung-ho approach?"

"Well, it's basically the broad energy policy — or the lack of a policy! Maybe the oil is going to be drilled eventually. But it should be done fairly, carefully, and slowly!" He examined his plastic cup critically. "This country's oil consumption has got to be slowed down."

"You mean, to conserve resources."

"More than that, to control pollution! Even if the oil were plentiful." He glanced toward Cabrillo Boulevard as a new tide of traffic surged forward from the stoplight. "Do you have any idea what it would do to the planet to release all the carbon that's been locked underground in the form of fossil fuel?"

I shrugged. "Most of it would eventually turn into carbon dioxide, or eventually living matter. Not exactly the worst pollutants."

"True. But the increased amounts of carbon gases in the atmosphere would alter Earth's climate. They tend to trap solar rays that now are reflected into space, you know. It could heat things up quite a bit."

"The so-called greenhouse effect." I drained my water cup. "It's not proven or even agreed on by authorities, Peter."

"Maybe not. But consider: during the Carboniferous period, when all the hydrocarbons were at the Earth's surface, the entire planet was hotter. The polar ice caps were small or nonexistent then, so sea levels were higher worldwide." His arms moved as if to conjure up a small tsunami wave from the harbor behind him. "Living matter was much denser in oceans and swamps — so profuse, really, that the processes of decay couldn't keep up with growth and death. The dead carbon was slowly deposited as soil and peat, and buried — and the world changed, by geologic processes, to the kind of habitat you and I evolved in." His gesture swept to include the palm-lined beach, the hazy sea, and the tangle of streets and houses climbing the base of the Santa Ynez mountains. "Doesn't that sound like a natural cycle to you? Would you want to bring back the Carboniferous age, dinosaurs and all? It might be interesting, but. . ."

I shook my head. "You're out of your specialty; dinosaurs didn't evolve until after the Carboniferous. Anyway, it all sounds pretty fanciful to me."

Peter smiled. "Still, a lot of knowledgeable folks are worried about energy pollution. It even has its advocates — like the League over there." He wrinkled his forehead. "If weirdos like that are for it, it can't be all good."

I followed his gaze to the parking lot, where a number of youths were forming a new phalanx of pickets. "You mean they're pro-greenhousers?"

"I gather so. But if you can figure out what the Leaguers really stand for, you're ahead of most of us." Peter looked bemused. "I don't actually know why they bother to turn up at these demonstrations."

"Maybe I'll check them out." I started to move away. "So long, Pete. It

was . . . interesting.”

He turned away with a good-natured shrug.

The new demonstrators were hard to place, comprising a third group that stood apart from the fairly well defined pro- and anti-oil factions. They had an aspect that marked them as members of a close-knit group; nothing so noticeable as the freak *chic* of groups like the Hare Krishnas or similar begging organizations, but a certain odd style nevertheless. Not students, I decided right away. But clearly local, judging from their tans and their preference for light cotton garb. They worked together with the ease of a shared creed. Their uniformly lettered picket signs bore slogans like RESPECT EARTH'S HERITAGE and DON'T DESPOIL OIL. They played to the onlookers who, at that side of the plaza, were primarily the scruffy nomads who frequent the relief missions around lower State Street.

Near the curb of the boulevard, where drivers gawked without slowing down, a small, lithe man who was clearly associated with the group had just finished talking to a photographer. He looked somewhat older and tanner than the others. Then I recognized him: he was none other than the spokesman I'd seen on the TV news clip the night before.

He turned and surveyed the scene, and his gaze settled on me as being, even in my jogging suit, one of the steadier-looking bystanders.

Then my attention was galvanized, and my sense of unreality welled up more dizzily than it ever had. For as he approached, I caught sight of the ornament hanging from his puka-shell necklace, which had been cut out of his TV picture by the camera's talking-head shot of him.

Dangling against his tan, downy chest — and identical, except for a perforation and a gold mounting ring, to those I'd recently seen — was one of the hexate fossil scales from deep beneath the Earth's surface.

While my thoughts raced, I got an excellent look at the object. Its wearer soon moved close to me, uncomfortably close. He was, I vaguely realized, using a common technique of religious cults to gain the attention of a targeted individual, by violating my personal “space.” He smiled confidently up into my face with his polished teeth.

“Want to help protect Earth's heritage?” He radiated confidence. “Come join us! We've got more signs on the bus if you want to carry one.” He pointed to a middle-aged, powder-blue vehicle that was taking up four parking spaces nearby.

I stepped back from him to gain a psychological buffer zone, although I'd resolved to get some information if I could. “Well, to do that, I'd have to know more about your group. What are you trying to accomplish?”

“We want to take political action to rationalize energy policy and promote human potential.” He looked me boldly in the face, with the air of a trained publicist. My move.

“In what way, exactly? Do you oppose offshore drilling? Or favor it?”

He kept smiling. “That depends on whether the drilling is done so that it

preserves the full potentiality of Earth's hydrocarbon stock. Regardless whether the drilling is offshore or onshore."

"You mean you oppose onshore wells, too?" My buffer zone was swiftly being reclaimed. "You're talking about regulated drilling? Or more efficient burning of fossil fuels?"

He glanced around us for an audience, but none had gathered, except some seedy loungers a dozen feet away. "Not fossil fuel, but fossil inheritance! Would you burn up books as fuel? Or human bodies?" The wrinkles that began to furrow his brow were quickly reabsorbed then, into an amiable expression. "There's more than mere fuel to be gained by tapping our fossil reserves."

I kept backing away. "I think I may have heard your argument before; correct me if I'm wrong. You say hydrocarbons are too valuable to become fuel, and that they ought to be saved for use in plastics and synthetics — as now is done only with the largest, most complex molecules. Right?"

He smiled tolerantly, gently. "Your concept of 'saving' is a strange one. It still assumes man has the right to seize precious resources and put them to gross uses — building materials and such. Remember, we're talking about the preserved essence, the vital potential, of whole epochs of Earth's youth." He rubbed his brow with the back of his hand, then flashed me a particularly winning smile. "By the way, my name's Zig Larkin. What's yours?"

To tell him my own name seemed as strangely imperative then as to shake the hand that he offered. When I admitted that I worked at the university, he seemed to warm up to me even more, though still refusing to do more than hint at the goals of his organization. Its name, I learned, was the Paleozoic League. Because of the peculiar way Larkin's interest in the remote past dovetailed with my own special area of knowledge, we struck some harmonious chords. But my attention was still fixed on one thing.

"What's that ornament you're wearing on your neck, if I may ask?"

"This? It's from Africa. The stone is an ancient relic." He held it forward in an oddly formalized way, thumb and forefinger each pressing one of the points. "Ever seen one like it?"

"No." I wasn't quite certain why I lied. "I wonder what its function would have been?"

"It's a ceramic tile from . . . a prehistoric settlement." His eyes rested calmly on my face. "The shape had a ritual significance. We'll be discussing it this evening, at my group's intake session."

A curious thing had happened. In spite of my grounds for mistrust of Larkin, or because of them, I was hooked. Whether he guessed that my initial motivation was that of skeptic, or even spy, I don't know. Such was the attraction of the mysteries his remarks hinted at that — and I now find my actions hard to rationalize or excuse — I agreed to ride with him to his cult's headquarters on Painted Caves Road. I was to go immediately, just as I was, in my track suit, and leave my car parked downtown.

And so there commenced an episode of which my memories aren't too clear. Later, after the insane culmination, this lack of continuity was used by Federal agents to discredit my version of the events. Recently, more of it has come back to me, though I haven't necessarily welcomed it.

Perhaps Larkin's amulet really had the mystical or hypnotic powers he ascribed to it. Perhaps the cult's inane songs and chants were capable of evoking an unconscious, atavistic level of behavior and feelings. At some point in the evening, I'm convinced, a hallucinogen was administered to me, either in the cult's spicy vegetable curry dinner or in the watery wine that accompanied it. But my mental lapse had begun well before that.

I remember being jostled by all the bland youngsters as I boarded the sea-blue bus, after the demonstration dissipated. I saw that a couple of the weathered lower-State-Street people had also been recruited to the Paleozoic cause. One was an unshaven, soiled man in an army coat, from whose torn pocket a wine bottle protruded; the other was a thin, sunburned fellow whose steel-rimmed glasses were taped together above his nose. I can't remember feeling any dismay at being grouped with them, at the time.

Painted Caves Road meanders over the crest of the Santa Ynez range — overlooking the sea, though itself nightly set adrift in a sea of fog. Its recesses shelter a few homes and hovels of artists, mystics, and the wealthy. After negotiating its loops in the ungainly bus, I had a dim impression of a ranch house and outbuildings nestled in a brushy canyon.

Inside the house, as on the bus, there was a lot of close, embracing family feeling — gummy pink smiles, rolled eyes, and asexual cuddling by the female members of the cult. After dinner came a solemn, sermonlike talk by Larkin, but my capacity to make sense of it was badly impaired. I can only repeat the gist of what was told me during the two days that, by mental reconstruction, I must have spent there.

The cult's mastermind wasn't Larkin, but a mysterious personage named Emil Sturla. He was a recluse who claimed to receive enlightenment from a psychic source. During most of my visit, he remained shut up in a guest house on the sea-facing edge of the estate.

Larkin's role was that of lieutenant or mouthpiece of the cult, though much of the day-to-day authority seemed to rest with him — including the assignment of a spiritual mentor to follow me to the toilet and take the bunk below mine. That was Pence, a frizzy-haired youngster whose sort I'd flunked on countless midterm exams. Since Larkin was absent or aloof much of the time, my indoctrination in cult teachings was left largely to Pence.

Their beliefs centered around a remotely prehistoric race whom they referred to as the Shapers. I can't say how many invocations and explications of this ancient people I heard, before it dawned on me that they were supposed *not* to be people — a race superior to humans in countless ways, the cultists assured me, but predating our species on Earth by as much as

350 million years. And, it was implied, their extraterrestrial origins were far older.

No descriptions or depictions of the Shapers were part of the League's teachings. They had descended to Earth by unspecified means at the end of the Permian geological period, a time of Eden-like vigor and profusion among the planet's developing life forms. And they'd decided to stay.

Indeed, they found the Carboniferous regime so hospitable to their way of life that they roamed the youthful planet without reliance on roads or cities, living easily among primeval jungles and swamps. What material monuments they may have erected are buried by the eons, but their technology was so advanced as not to depend on a human-style devastation and subjugation of their environment. For instance, as Larkin maintained, they had no use for fire, and no knowledge of it, except perhaps as a natural curiosity.

The sources and channels of their power were obscure to human understanding, possibly even magical, but tremendously potent. Reputedly, they possessed the ability to transform the face of the planet at will and to direct the development of its life forms to serve their needs. Their casual experimentation, as cult doctrine would have it, brought the first sea beasts crawling onto the land, hastening their evolution to amphibians. Hence their position of worship as the Shapers of earthly life.

It is at the height of the Shapers' benign million-year dominion that the Paleozoic League's creation myth takes a cataclysmic turn. It develops that the Shapers who came to our world were only refugees or fugitives from a parent culture, an empire that held sway elsewhere on a cosmic scale. Those other beings, although kindred to the beings that colonized Earth, were also their powerful and implacable enemies. Ultimately, they unleashed a holocaust on the Earth-dwellers.

There is in the cult's mythos the implication that the Shapers were somehow being punished for befriending or tampering with the flora and fauna of Earth — a twist of dogma similar to the Promethean myth of Greek tradition. Perhaps Earth had been placed off-limits. Perhaps, in mingling with local life forms, the visitors had violated some extraterrestrial taboo as potent as our own bans on incest and bestiality. That would help to explain the severity of the retribution that was visited on them.

The method of vengeance was an ingenious one, that also offered me a chilling glimpse of alien thought. The gravity of Earth, by means of the off-worlders' arcane technology, was magnified a thousandfold. The effect, wherever the dreadful weapon was applied, was not merely to crush all living things, including the Shapers, but to render them practically liquid. Reduced to a viscous torrent, they ran to the lowest pockets of terrain, amid a cataclysm that rocked the planet, initiating many of the geologic forms that underlie the modern landscape. The native species were left to recover as best they could, but the Shapers' reign was ended.

And yet, in spite of what seems the utter extirpation of their erring breth-

ren, the avengers weren't finished. According to a central doctrine of League teaching, there was a kind of immortality in these alien beings — an insidious vitality that would make them ever capable of reviving, even from such comprehensive destruction. So the last step in the Shapers' subjugation, before their righteous kin turned away from Earth and forgot it forever, was to *pave over* entirely the denatured masses of animal and vegetable matter in those areas of the planet where the Shapers had been destroyed.

The paving surface consisted of small, uniform ceramic tiles that, whether because of their interlocking shape or other mystical properties, were thought immovable and impermeable to the alien life force beneath.

So here was the source of my intense fascination with the cult: that the antediluvian paving-tiles were none other than the small hexate fossil flakes drilled up by the *Daffodil* rig — the fossils which had lately come to pattern my thoughts and dreams. They were the sole tangible, undeniable evidence that, time and again during my dazed sojourn with the League, set my imagination reeling across cosmic gulfs.

Needless to explain, the formless remains of the Shapers and their Carboniferous habitat had gone on in cult belief to become one with the immense fossil mineral deposits laid down all around them. The hexate tiles capping some of the deepest oil deposits remained the only clue to their weird alien origin. Impossibly, the Shapers' tenacious life spark was said to persist right up to the present day, but the only way it could reach outside its prison of primeval rock was in the form of psychic power, shaping the dreams and meditations of a few sensitive, sentient organisms on the earth above, and bringing them visions of the Shapers' vast premortal kingdom. Emil Sturla, the Paleozoic League's founder, claimed to be one so blessed. It had become his mission to perpetuate the memory and worship of the beings into modern centuries — and also, it was hinted, to prepare the way for their ultimate resurrection. The details of the Rising, as it was called, were known only to the inner circle of the cult, but the prayers and hopes of all the members were focused on it as ardently and as urgently as one might expect in any fanatical religious sect.

Such were the beliefs I was exposed to during long, brotherly chats with Pence, cloyingly confessional "faith sessions" with groups of earnest cultists, and glib suppertime sermons by Larkin. Yet these only skimmed the surface; I wasn't initiated into the deeper workings of the cult. There were many talks I was barred from, and often I noticed odd gestures and words being used whose meanings Pence couldn't or wouldn't explain.

The most tantalizing exclusion occurred the second night, when the majority of the membership followed Larkin out of the ranch house and up the brushy mountain slope, carrying flashlights and gas lanterns. It must have been an outdoor meeting, for its noises and diffused light occasionally found their way back down to us through the drifting fog. Pence, obviously

assigned as a babysitter, sat restless beside me on the tattered sofa in the day-room. He pretended to read and re-read a mimeographed tract, but kept glancing out the grimy picture window. We were the only ones left behind; I even saw the two down-and-out vagabonds who had been recruited with me leaving with the others — though I don't recall seeing them return. I had dozed off by the time the celebrants came back, and I let myself be walked sleepily to my bunk.

Then, the very next day, came the event that roused me from what had become my passive, receptive stupor. Even before lunch I sensed a ferment of expectation among the cultists — but after the soupy meal we were told to remain seated at the long tables in the dining room. Feeling uneasy, I was able to spill my doped Kool-aid and make it look like an accident, without having more forced on me. Then we were hushed by none other than Sturla himself, our reclusive leader, for an announcement that was clearly to be of weighty importance.

He was an impressive figure — large and rawboned, old, but not elderly, with a big, angular, ill-shaven face that now appeared slightly puffed and pink with excitement. His shock of white hair was uncared for, sticking up at odd angles here and there. He wore a rumpled white shirt, loose gray slacks held up by suspenders, and frayed house slippers. The pale hands that he rested on the sideboard ended in half-inch lengths of fingernail, untrimmed but unsoiled.

His eyes searched the room without focusing, and he began speaking in a voice that was deep but unmodulated. "Dear allies in the Paleozoic cause. I am . . . that is . . . I have waited so long for this moment. . . ."

He stopped and shook his shaggy head with an air that would have seemed theatric, if it had been planned.

"It's . . . hard to put it into words. We've searched, and plotted, and dreamed . . . the dreaming was the hardest, yes." During his pause, a murmur of standardized assent filled the room.

"My friends! All is to be as prophesied. And sooner, much sooner, than we hoped." He turned his face down to the smudged table, then up to the ceiling. "The fruits of last night's ceremony were propitious . . . and the time of the Rising has been vouchsafed to me.

"It will be . . . tonight!"

At his word, electricity passed through the room. Everyone stood, and a hubbub of exclamations and questions arose. Over it, Sturla's voice gradually re-emerged.

". . . and yes, there's much to be done. Our intercession tonight may be crucial. Now listen to friend Larkin for the details. . . ." Sturla's wraithlike form stooped and receded, though it still loomed over Larkin's as he pushed forward.

"Everyone, remember your jobs." The propagandist's manner had become brusque and authoritative. "Crew members, leave now and prepare

the boat. The rest of you will attend a meeting in the briefing room immediately. Go!"

The group boiled away into activity. I was interested, though still a little out of it, and I drifted along with the crowd down an unfamiliar corridor. As I neared its end, a tan, blond-haired arm — Larkin's — shot in front of me and barred my way.

"Olin, sorry." He hardly smiled. "I'm afraid you're not ready for this phase. Our schedule's been pushed way ahead. Go with Pence — he'll find you something useful to do." He leaned toward the youth, who'd just come up behind me, and spoke quietly into his ear.

A moment later, I let my young guardian lead me away without protest. But my brain was no longer quiescent; it was busily sorting out what I'd glimpsed over the heads of the cultists as they filed into the assembly room. There'd been a large color photo cut from a recent issue of *Offshore Industries* magazine: an Exoco ad, picturing the *Daffodil* platform. And on the green chalkboard next to it were sketched some larger diagrams, clearly depicting the same structure.

How the bizarre linkages kept multiplying! There was suddenly no doubt in my mind; the rig was the target of the cult's imminent boat trip! As the realization settled home, I felt my dormant distaste for the cultists hardening into anger. Their planned excursion — presumably an attack on the platform — reminded me forcefully, for the first time in days, of Jean Hinchcliffe. My growing concern was more for her and other innocent victims than for any of Exoco's holdings.

Pence led me through the kitchen and down the exterior stairs, toward the carports under the end of the house. Outside the fog was just beginning to break up, with occasional apertures of dazzling blue illuminating the gray sky. The bus was parked in front of the carports, its wheels chocked against the steep slope of the drive, its side cargo hatches open. A pair of male cultists deposited two red cylinders into the luggage bays just as we came down; then they disappeared around the corner of the building.

"We can help with the loading," Pence announced, looking back at me resignedly. "We're supposed to get all the equipment from around the place — Hey, where are you going?"

"Home," I said, turning my back to him.

"You can't leave now." As I moved away, I felt his presence close behind me, and his hand reached over my shoulder. Remembering my three weeks of aikido training, I clasped his hand flat against my chest and stepped into motion, twisting my body sharply away. This brought him up against one of the steel pipes that supported the house. His only sound was a muffled half-gasp, but the metal post made a deep thrumming noise as his skull struck it.

Ready for more of a struggle, I grasped his arm, but his body was already limp. I checked his pulse, then wrestled him over to the row of grimy garbage cans that stood along the house. I lowered him behind them with as lit-

tle clatter as possible. He lay unmoving but breathing regularly, cushioned on a pile of soggy newsprint.

Rather than go to the exposed western side of the house where the two men had gone moments before, I headed straight for the hillside. I had a vague idea of the direction of the San Marcos Pass highway, and wisps of blowing fog still screened me from the house moment by moment.

Dense chaparral made parts of the slope impassable. I was scratched painfully through my track suit, and I knew that the poison oak I brushed against would cause me misery in a week or two — but in my stay at the ranch I'd glimpsed the cult's discipline, and I expected pursuit momentarily. I worked my way up a ravine, found a well-trodden path crossing it, and followed it away from the ranch. It ended in a clearing with grass recently trampled, brush cut back, and soil dug and churned.

It must, I realized, have been the site of the cult's nocturnal meeting. There was nothing to show the exact nature of the gathering, but I did see strange things in the dirt: drying, brine-whitened floats and leaves of still-pungent ocean kelp, and half a crushed steel eyeglass frame, its lens gone.

After prolonged, desperate struggles with manzanita and crumbling cliffs, I made it down to the highway. By that time the sun had banished the morning mists and commenced burning my skin and dehydrating me. I started walking down the steep road grade.

The dozenth car to pass slowed for my raised thumb, then stopped half-off the pavement on a blind curve. It was an open-topped Triumph occupied by two college girls in tennis outfits. I jumped in and perched wordlessly on the ledge behind the seats as the sports car spun its cliffside wheel on loose gravel. It caught with a jerk, and we took off down the hairpin road toward city and sea, spreading in silver vistas below us.

After a ride that was too hair-raising for conversation, the girls dropped me downtown, not far from the harbor and my car. My first and final question to my benefactors — whether or not they had change for a dollar — was the subject of noisy sophomore hilarity as they drove off.

I finally got change from a liquor store and found an open phone stall on traffic-laden Chorro Street. I spent the balance of the waning afternoon plugged into a buzzing network of wires and relays, calling law enforcement agencies.

Looking back, I guess it's not surprising that my efforts were in vain. One uncertainty is whether my thoughts and speech were by then quite lucid or still befuddled by my experiences with the cult. Another problem I ran into was the jurisdictional uncertainty regarding offshore rigs. The local police and sheriff's office were of little help, and when I finally reached the Coast Guard, the people there were unwilling to take my warnings seriously. Exoco's private security agency, on the other hand, heard me with ill-concealed suspicion, as if my message were a threat rather than a warning.

Their insistence on getting personal data on me caused me to hang up, in the belief that the call was being traced.

I tried to reach Peter Magnusson for backup or suggestions. He wasn't available at home or work.

The last call I made was to the platform, to warn Jean Hinchcliffe personally. I was told that Exoco's land-sea equipment was malfunctioning. Contact would probably be restored within a few hours, the operator said.

I found that my car hadn't been towed, though it had garnered two parking tickets. I got in and drove to my apartment for the sake of showering, changing clothes, and washing down some leftovers with stale orange juice from the fridge. All the while my thoughts were unreeling. I didn't believe it would do any good to renew my phone haggling, even if I could manage to get the cult's mountain retreat raided. Its new focus was obviously the sea.

So I took a warm coat and a watch cap and got back into my car. As the sun sank toward Point Concepción, I drove straight into its glare, heading westward and northward toward Avila Beach.

By the time Route 101 edged into sight of the sea again, day had faded. It was now only a faint fringe of blue above the flat rim of ocean, which was featureless except for the pinprick lights of the *Daffodil* platform a long way out. After parking in the cramped lot near the public pier, I strolled past returning charter-boat patrons toward the water.

Marine field trips and expeditions, often undercrewed, have given me a good general knowledge of boats, as well as a good specific knowledge of where certain unguarded ones may be found. *Narwhal*, a small, muscular cabin cruiser belonging to California Polytechnic U., was moored year-round at Avila for field study use. It was no great trouble to walk out on the pier, clamber down a ladder to the water, and appropriate one of the sloshing rowboats moored there by yacht owners. I rowed out amid the anchored craft in the last dimness of dusk. My recollection of the harbor was accurate enough to lead me straight out to *Narwhal*. I moored the rowboat to the buoy and climbed aboard.

The vessel was maintained with an institutional sort of informality; I could tell that I wasn't the first casual user to hot-wire it. With ample fuel in the tank and the platform lights beckoning offshore, my course was clear.

I fired up the motor, cast off, and maneuvered the nimble craft out past the breakwater before switching on the running lights. When I saw the rotating beacon of Point San Luis to starboard, I pointed her and set the throttle at a chugging cruising speed. I had good visibility and very little chop, so there wasn't much else for me to do, except worry and wait.

In the broad sense I wasn't sure what I was doing there, and I wondered how much of my behavior could be attributed to drug aftereffects. Underneath the thrill of larceny, I experienced alternate pangs of urgency, anxiety, and embarrassment. I might not be allowed to land at the rig, and yet my

appearance there could still ready them for a more dangerous invasion by cultists, if only I arrived in time. The puzzle of the cult's immediate goals I'd given up as insoluble — partly because it involved asking myself how much truth might lurk in their fantastic, fanatic beliefs. But the destination seemed certain.

So I sat at the wheel, wrestling my own pet demons. The cruise, in any event, promised to be an easy one — but then, it's easy to forget all the ways down the years the California coast has proven to be the most dangerous one in the world. For one thing, as I crawled across Pismo Bay, a fog began to rise.

Not that it's all that common, really, for a fog to *rise* at sea. Usually, it's blown in, by warm winds moving across colder water. That hadn't seemed at all likely tonight, nor had it been forecast on the radio news I'd listened to while driving up. The mild, sage-scented land breeze I'd felt in the harbor certainly couldn't have produced a fog over cool summer seas.

Yet here was one being born all around me. I felt an oppressive density in the air, and visible vapors hung over the spray from *Narwhal's* bow. The bright necklace of land lights behind me had already started to twinkle and dim.

I aimed the boat's bow carefully and noted my compass course. Current and tide shouldn't prove to be important factors, I reasoned, in the hour or so of cruising ahead. Presumably, to prevent collisions, the platform would sound a foghorn, like the one on the point that was starting to moan dismally behind me.

I hoped at first that my steady progress would outrun the weather change, but on the dark sea ahead, the platform lights were soon obscured. In the course of a few minutes, wisps of fog lit by pale starlight seemed almost to boil up from the sea and engulf its still-distant outline. I recalled the tepid, tropical warmth of the water that had soaked me at the base of the platform, and it occurred to me that a local temperature anomaly might possibly give rise to a convection fog — swamp fog.

Then grayness sealed me in. I groped in a locker for the foghorn and commenced blowing at short intervals, listening in between. But I didn't reduce my speed.

I was insane, you say? I deny it. It's easy to feel insane when bounding through a gray nothingness backlit by beams of red, white, and green running lights, hurtling toward an unseen goal. But I felt entirely rational — until certain physical impressions began to challenge my rationality.

A seaman can sense changes in wind, weather, and current by the feel of his vessel. Different motions of the ship are associated with varying tidal conditions, and a seasoned hand can detect them even while shut up below decks. Yet I, that foggy night, though not a skilled sailor, began to experience evolutions wildly unsuited to time, place, and weather.

First there was an odd feeling of acceleration, like voyaging *downhill*, if

that were possible; then, in rising seas, *Narwhal* started to pitch with the giddy motion of a surf boat. When the first great wave broke over the bow, I wondered whether I was crossing the wake of some huge ship, perhaps a supertanker, but the swells continued with a jolting regularity that ruled out that possibility.

At one point a freakish cross-wave struck from the port side, and I almost imagined the loom of a huge sea beast surfacing off my beam. But it was only a thick shred of mist that drifted across the deck and scattered. A series of rollers broke over the bulwarks with almost seismic force, scouring the deck. The shocks threw me from side to side, dangling me from the wheel like a puppet, while bilge water splashed my knees. I held on, keeping the engine laboring for survival's sake, though it seemed the screw must be clear of the water most of the time.

After long minutes of fighting the wheel, tempest-tossed on an impossibly windless sea, there came sounds, too — sounds even stranger than the sea's spastic motions. There was the hissing crash of breakers against rocks, a dreaded noise I should only have heard leagues from my present position; but then, these were random, irregular crashes, not like any earthly breakers. Terrifyingly, they seemed to emanate from all sides.

Even more menacing was a vast resonance that my ears positively declined to believe: the deep thundering of a great cataract. Its size and distance were shrouded by the fog, which nevertheless seemed almost to roil with the force of it. I debated whether to cut my engine to keep from getting any nearer.

Then a current of riverine intensity caused the boat to yaw; I swear that she was making sternway, in spite of the laboring motor. Momentarily, the sea was transformed into the heaving maelstrom of a malevolent child's bathtub, then, with a horrid grating, *Narwhal* went aground. I was thrown over backward and knocked senseless.

I wasn't unconscious long, I can say in retrospect, judging by the expanses and convolutions of that mad night which still lay ahead of me. I awoke in the bilge, in the depressed stern of the boat, which was dead aground and crazily askew. And I opened my eyes on stars: bright, icy, unwinking stars that shone down with an airless clarity one would expect only in desert latitudes or mountains.

As I lifted my throbbing head, the light of a late-risen moon smote me from low in the sky. I remember thinking that the same freakish weather which befogged the night must have preternaturally cleared it. I fingered the back of my skull and found it painful to touch, then I gathered my cold, cramped limbs under me and stood upright against the sloping gunwale.

The lungfuls of air that accompanied my exertion had the briny reek of low tide, so, strangely, the sight that awaited me wasn't a surprise. Part of me expected it, yet that didn't stop the terror of it from sweeping through

my chest and numbing my fingers and toes.

On all sides the sea had flown; its rocky bed lay exposed. It had bared to the stars a weird, asteroidal landscape. Miry, sodden meadows spread between ragged hillocks crested with coral and lank weed. Smooth tarns of trapped seawater gleamed everywhere under the lurid moonlight.

The newborn terrain was rough and uneroded, but generally even-trending, and my vision carried for miles in some directions. In the east, however, the anguished contours of subseascape ended abruptly in a snowy-white fogbank. The damnable vapor now hung solidly where the moon told me the view of natural coastline should have been. I thought I could make out the ranked peaks of the Coast Range along the indistinct upper edge of cloud, but the shoreline itself was smothered.

To westward my vision was curtailed by the trend of slope — which should have been falling away toward the brink of the Pacific Trench, but now ascended to the level of some low crests or mesas reared against the stars. Water ran down them in splattering rivulets, combining into streams that flowed through deep shadows near the boat. Their gurglings in invisible crevices gave the eerie impression of human voices close at hand.

Where six hundred feet of living ocean had suddenly gone, I couldn't conceive. Such a displacement in depth! But had the sea sunk or the land risen, and over how great an area? Deep-sea life would have been devastated by the loss of pressure, as the audible flopping and splashing around me of dying fish with ruptured air bladders confirmed. Dazedly, I tried to judge the magnitude of the ecological catastrophe, then I thought of the probable effect on the oil rig and the coastal cities.

Moving up the canted deck, I found that my body still functioned, though painfully. My mind, less resilient to a greater shock, was partly numbed, but it still worked smoothly on a subrational level. Thoughts circled in my mind like deep-swimming fish: my concern for Jean, my intent to help the other riggers, my awe of a vast natural phenomenon, the love of the sea, my survival instinct — all swam about in the cauldron of my brain, but none surfaced, as I prepared to leave the boat.

I knew that usually, in cases of freak tidal groundings, such an action is considered foolhardy. Yet in the weird urgency of my situation, it seemed the only possible choice. I threw a few items from the boat's equipment locker into a duffel bag: water bottle, first-aid kit, inflatable life vest. I exchanged my coat for a dry windbreaker, but my other damp clothes had to stay on. Squelching track shoes were as good a footwear as any for walking where no human had walked. With a feeling of Dantean adventure, I eased myself over the stern rail to set my feet in a weedy pool.

Walking the sea floor proved less difficult than I expected. The fury of the sea's retreat had done damage in the form of freshly eroded gullies and windrows of tumbled kelp. But the level places usually gave a firm, sandy footing, and the rocky surfaces were covered with slick but angular coral.

The land wasn't formed for drainage; hence the numerous pools, ranging in size from puddles to small lakes. Most that I found on the sloping terrain were narrow and shallow enough to cross.

If I'd had the leisure to study those pools and drained sea gardens, I would have learned much. Life was there in profusion, even if some of the species lay in helpless agony; other dark shapes could be seen flitting beneath the waters of the deeper pools, and stirrings and sputterings were audible around their margins. Some ponds were wet meadows of *zostera* and *posidonia* plants, alive with sheltering fish, shrimp, and gastropods, while elsewhere stood drooping specimens of coral-branching *Carophyllia* and polypous *Cerianthus*. Echinoderms and crinoids sparkled in bright pastels, spotlighted by the ascending moon.

Still, the very abundance of life in and around the pools made me cautious. I was reluctant to wade too deeply among predatory sea creatures that might be starved or frenzied; some of the splashes and eddies looked powerful. Therefore, I skirted all but the shallowest sea puddles, staying watchful.

The steepest part of my climb was just above my grounded boat. After negotiating a box canyon heaped with raw sand, possibly the site of the cataract I'd heard roaring an eternity ago, I surveyed a new, glacial vista of pools and hillocks extending several hundred yards ahead. The next horizon, only slightly elevated, was eerily outlined by pale phosphorescence shining out of the west.

But the most unnerving new sight was an immense snakelike form twisting out of a tangle of weed at my feet. I'd already tensed to run from it when I saw that its bulging head was a set of concrete cylinders, and that its sinuous tail, winding out of sight underwater, was a steel cable as thick as my thigh. It was, presumably, one of the massive clump-weights stabilizing the half-mile hawsers that radiated from the *Daffodil* tower and supported it. The cable's slackness on the sea floor didn't bode well for the rig; I scanned the sky ahead for its lights and its angular shape, in vain.

For the first time in many minutes, Jean came back to my thoughts, bringing an aching clench of anxiety to my heart. Could she possibly be alive? For all I knew, my feelings for her were still pathetically one-sided. Yet now, suddenly, I craved the chance to find out, and win her over. I envisioned her reclining in the cafeteria chair that evening on the rig, when Blair Vincent had seemed such an obstacle. She'd treated both of us with warmth, and it was clear now that his patronage of her was just an arrogant pose. "Idiot!" I cursed myself for nursing petty jealousies while lives were at stake.

Talking to yourself is a sign of mental distraction, but hearing yourself answered can be alarming. I cast about nervously until I realized that the sounds I heard were the echoes of other human voices to the southward.

I felt a surge of hope, yet something made me refrain from crying out. I ran across a rippled sand expanse toward the sounds, scaled a low hummock, and peered around a jagged coral bush. I saw a party of walkers

approaching on lower ground.

Leaguers. They formed a straggling line, heading toward a convergence with my own route up ahead. I counted twenty-three, some carrying red cylinders slung over their shoulders: fire extinguishers, I now saw. At the front of the procession were a tall and a short figure whom I recognized as Emil Sturla and Zig Larkin.

There was no sign of their boat; presumably, it had grounded like my own. The band plodded resolutely along, engaging in speech only to hurry the slowest members up. Sturla, his white shirt hanging untucked from the back of his soggy pants, forged ahead like an unkempt Moses, while Larkin gave his attention to those behind. Some of the followers, even the unburdened ones, were obviously weak or lacking agility for the trek; one slid down a mossy bank into a pool as I watched, and had to be dragged out by three tired companions amidst a flurry of splashes.

They, too, had to be seeking the platform. They seemed to have a firm idea of its location.

I hurried ahead on a parallel course, keeping pace with the party without being seen. The ground was broken enough to afford me cover, so I didn't have to give all my attention to stalking the cultists. As I pressed on, I began to notice disturbing changes.

One was the raw reek of hydrocarbons in the air. It told me, since the night remained windless, that I was drawing nearer the rig. The smell was becoming so intense that I feared it might make a close approach impossible, or that any survivors near the rig might have been asphyxiated. Crude oil fumes have made my head swim before, but this odor had a particularly rank, pungent quality, fortified by the sewage fragrance of butane gas. It was almost putrescent, with undertones of marsh or zoo. Strangely, as it worsened, the night itself seemed to grow balmier and warmer.

A more subtle transformation was in the appearance of the life forms around me. I'd become almost accustomed to mounds and drooping shrubs of variously shaped and tinted corals. Discreet constellations of starfish and slumped tapestries of glossy-green weed had been present all along, where the moon struck or reflected up from a pond surface. But now I began to discern plant outlines that were more erect and vaguely fernlike or reedlike. A stand of thin-bladed plants at a pool's edge waved with surprising resilience when stirred by water currents, while small, frog-sized splashes began to mark my approach to new ponds.

In all, the ecology gradually seemed hardier and less stricken by the sea's passing. A quick, scuttering disappearance into a black recess of rock, though only half-glimpsed, somehow bespoke scorpion more than crab.

I knew that I might be seeing a natural transition to a deeper level of ocean floor, or at least formerly deeper. Yet I had an eerie impression that many of the life forms were terrestrial rather than marine, and primitive rather than modern. Most incongruous was a recurring squat, thick-based growth with

frondlike branches projecting upward and outward, resembling a long-extinct cycad. I even shifted my course, after gauging the steady progress of the cultists, to pass near one of the treelike things, but I couldn't walk close because its vicinity was heavily polluted by thick, reeking oil.

Looking around, I saw other traces of bunker oil. It seemed to be carried mainly on the water, spreading in black rainbows or clotted like floating sewage. Most of the dry ground was free of it, though I did begin to feel sticky clumps adhering to the soles of my shoes. I tried to trace its flow, with little success, but it clearly originated from the general direction of the plateau that rose before me. I began to interpret the radiance in the air as a spreading miasma of oil-born gases refracting the moonlight.

And yet that explanation wasn't quite adequate, for there were strange flickers and pulses of overlying luminescence, resembling an *aurora borealis* in their effect. They were caused, I decided, by the spontaneous combustion of highly volatile gases mixing with night air, as occurs in some dense swamps. A peculiar situation, and in this case possibly a hazardous one.

While I tried to find more patterns in the insane jumble of my surroundings, the cultists had drawn ahead of me. Their party was spread along a defile angling up toward the now-bright plateau crest. As I hurried to follow their course, I saw enough to convince me that the flora and fauna really were changing. I felt like a hiker crossing vegetation zones as he ascends a mountain, but that metaphor is deficient. Rather I felt that I was *descending*, and not in elevation but in time.

For the species I was seeing were definitely prehistoric. It was the oil that spawned them; wherever it lapped against rock, there stood primitive plants rooted in its congealed slime. Lycopods, calamites, seed-ferns — they were thick enough now to give the impression of a primeval marsh superimposed over the drained sea floor. Mental calculations led me to date the vegetation as late Mississippian, the very age of the fossiliferous oil strata the offshore rig had tapped. I couldn't guess how long this regeneration of ancient life had been going on, or how far it might spread. But its association with the flow of freshly leaked oil made its growth seem alarmingly swift.

And the furtive movements in and about the pools made it clear that the strange recrudescence wasn't limited to the plant kingdom. A look into a clear, moonlit pond revealed trilobites and small, lobe-finned fishes darting and creeping along its bottom. Hurried as I was, every professional instinct urged me to stay and observe. But as I tried to peer closer, I was startled by a loud, crackling buzz in the air near my head. Something hurtled past, grotesquely resembling a dragonfly — except that its wingspan easily exceeded two feet! It was enough to start me moving again. Moments later, while skirting a deep tarn, I clearly saw a squat, four-legged, fin-tailed shape slide beneath the surface of the water and disappear. The thing was large as a collicie, and clamped in its jaws had been a wriggling salmon.

With my faculty of amazement long since overtaxed, the only emotion left

to me was dread. What I was seeing tallied all too closely with the cult's insane prediction of a Paleozoic Rising. Though they awaited it with zealous anticipation, to me it could mean only evil. As a paleontologist I couldn't regard the strange creatures springing up around me as repellent or monstrous, of course. Rather they were of intense scientific interest; there wasn't one of them I wouldn't have delighted in studying. But there was something distinctly unwholesome about the notion of an ancient regime superimposing itself on a modern, healthy ecosystem — feeding on it, and blotting it out, all with supernatural speed and vitality. The implied menace to Earth and humanity was tremendous.

Consequently, I became even more cautious. The bizarre logic of the situation indicated that any life I encountered wouldn't have evolved much past the amphibian stage; still, that included some nasty customers, and I took care to avoid surprising any large or aggressive species. The local vegetation was becoming dense enough to obstruct my way — and when I pushed through it, clouds of clacking insects swarmed up in my face. It took me long minutes to reach the next eminence, forced as I was to skirt the cultists' route. Then I had to stop to take in the view that dawned.

Before me lay the Carboniferous swamp in all its lush, primeval menace. It spread away in thickets and watery reaches that rippled silver under the moon. Its interior was well grown-up compared to the fringe that I'd crossed; groves of supple, jagged-fronded trees formed weirdly evocative skylines against mists drifting upward from bogs. Foliage seemed to grow and multiply at almost a visible rate; the largest palm trunks were thicker than a man's body, with dense fern jungles making their bases invisible.

Extending an unguessable distance, the swamp provided an eerie backdrop; in its foreground lay the vast wreckage of the *Daffodil* rig. A hundred feet of the supporting central tower still stood above the marsh at a crippled angle, twisted off cruelly at the top. Below, more ironwork lay in a colossal jumble of half-submerged struts and cables, doubled back on themselves by the shearing forces of the ocean's subsidence.

The concrete base of the tower, with its drill template and steel-pipe Christmas trees, had ruptured; that was inevitable, ripped as it was half out of the sea floor. That provided the copious fountain of oil that fed the life teeming all around. From the gaping wreckage, viscous blackness poured into a pool that seemed to flow and eddy with a life of its own, before streaming away to nourish the swamp. From both fount and pool sputtered the gases that flickered and burned away in strange-hued foxfires overhead.

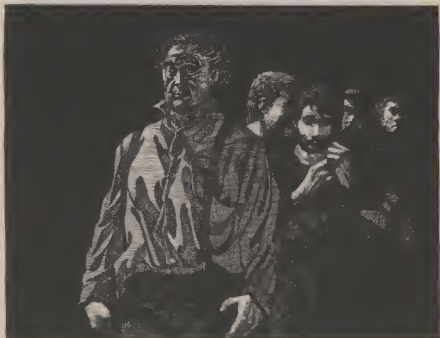
Washed by their fitful light, at the very brink of the oil pool, was the most heart-wrenching part of the scene: the demolished superstructure of the platform. All of it — machinery, production areas, and crew quarters — appeared to have been dashed on one side to the sea floor, or else staved in by tumultuous seas. With no built-in flotation, it may have sunk before the final flight of the waters, but in any event, there seemed little hope of find-

ing survivors inside. The massive structure was buckled and rent, its cranes and derricks sprawled in the weeds, its ruptured oil storage tanks oozing tangled swamp verdure out over the wreckage.

I felt numbing despair at the sight, for Jean. The fate of the others was a grave concern, but it wouldn't have made me feel the same plummeting emotion. Still, I knew it would be premature to rule out the hope of survivors in or near the wreck. I needed to be sure.

The coral-topped rise where I stood was still fairly clean of swamp growth, and the cultists were in plain view down its slope. They loitered on the reedy marge of an oil-scummed lake that spread between us and the platform ruins. The leaders had stopped to reform the party, and the stragglers were just catching up. Sturla seemed impatient to go on; he stood, swiveling between his followers and the wilderness prospect ahead, gesturing with both his arms, and inveighing in words I couldn't make out. Meanwhile, Larkin moved among the troops, laying hands on shoulders and urging them forward. Soon, though the last arrivals had scarcely been given time to rest, they were moving on again in a narrow file, thigh-deep along the lake's edge.

Just then the water seemed to explode in the midst of the group. Where spray scattered, I saw a gleaming, shingled back raised a yard out of the water, twisting and arching in currents churned by powerful fins. Screams drifted up to me from the scattering pilgrims, and flailing limbs attested that



one or more of their number were dragged down.

Water jetted to alternate sides as their assailant, a great armored fish, backed itself out of the shallows. Then its supple tail flicked once, driving it out of sight into the murky depths of the lake.

The aftermath of the terror was strangely anticlimactic. Larkin was already shouting as he marshaled the group once more. He picked up discarded fire extinguishers and thrust them at cultists, who took them quietly. Sturla forged far ahead through the swamp, as if he hadn't even noticed the incident.

As they resumed their march, I found myself descending toward the lake to follow them. Their course seemed to lie near the wreckage, where I wanted to go. But I wasn't ready to throw my life away; I took a wider detour through the lake shallows to avoid its largest denizens.

Partly because of this, shadowing the cultists proved toilsome. My rucksack was heavy with dampness, and my wet trousers chafed. The marsh reeds had rough edges that caught at my clothing and abraded my hands. With each step my feet sank deep into oily muck, and from time to time I felt live things writhing hurriedly from under my probing shoe soles. My vision was clouded by giant, blundering gnats and the clacking dragonflies that hunted them. Worst of all were the oil fumes: almost tangible in the tropic heat, they filled my battered head with a low, steady pain.

The surroundings grew more menacing as I moved into a zone of palmlike trees that arched high overhead. The ground there was firmer, but also brushier, and I felt sure that the shadowy thickets harbored new and unguessed dangers.

Yet the shadows served to shelter me when I heard low voices nearby. I pushed stealthily forward through a fern-choked glade and found the cult assembled on the high bank of a pitchy, gleaming lagoon. The cultists had drawn close under the angled ruin of the steel tower; a few dozen yards further along the shore, the oil rig's superstructure loomed like a toppled office block.

The morass in front of us seemed to mark the very heart of the swamp. The wavelets lapping at the cultists' feet were driven by the gush of oil from forbidden strata far beneath. The coarse liquid could be heard sputtering and bubbling thickly somewhere nearby. Viewed this closely, the lagoon's aspect was utterly unearthly.

As I'd noted, the waters at its center seemed to swirl with a crude animism of their own. Now, by the wavering light of the swamp-gas auroras, I thought I could see vague shapes rearing up and subsiding in the flow: amphibian and plant forms, trunks and extremities, striving of their own will to accrue and combine into rudimentary creatures, then falling back to oil liquescence, even as their substance gushed raw out of the warm bowels of earth.

While hiding in the ferns, I closed my eyes and shook my head, thinking

the bad air might be making me hallucinate. But when I turned my gaze back to the near edge of the maelstrom, my mad perception was confirmed. There, on a slimy beach amid weed-crawling wreckage, I watched a cow-sized batrachian creature — the uneasy mating of fish and frog — hauling itself forth as if to bask in moon rays. But an instant before, I had seen it, not surface from the pond, but rather *coalesce* in it, raising itself like an Escher nightmare from the very substance of the pool's shallowest edge, writhing and heaving even while its half-formed limbs still grossly extruded themselves!

That was my clearest glimpse of how the jungle around me had come to exist, miraculously, in the few short hours since the sea drained away: through the virulent life-energy of the hydrocarbons the *Daffodil* rig had tapped. For once, oil and water *could* mix — instantly, to reconstitute an extinct world, speeded by strange, massive physiographic and climatic changes.

Of all the questions raised in my mind, the foremost was: what force impelled and guided this phenomenon? Was it intelligent? Was it benign, or at least natural? If the cult's beliefs were valid as they now seemed, then an ancient power was re-establishing itself on Earth. And if the League's own inhuman practices and the feral aspect of the world springing up around me were any indication, then the guiding power scarcely seemed to need human adoration and worship. Whatever it was, it was powerful, clearly — but benevolent?

The best evidence to the contrary lay before me: the shattered wreckage of the rig. As with the pond, close inspection yielded unpleasant sights. The blossoming prehistoric life, denser and more vital near its source, seemed to be hugging the ruin with a special obscene intimacy. Thick-bellied palms clustered in shattered windows and doorways, while fronds and creepers caressed the skewed catwalks. I scanned in vain for any sign of human survival; no lights or systematic movements showed. But to my horror, on the sloping surface of the helicopter pad, two of the squat amphibian creatures tugged and worried with tooth-fringed jaws at something — a tattered morsel whose shape suggested that it might once have been human. Stomach clenching, I stared in horror.

My grim reconnaissance had been made over the shoulders of the waiting cult members. Now I looked up as their low, nervous talk was hushed by Larkin. He moved through the group and urged them forward to the water's edge, there to kneel. When they were down, he fell to his own knees beside them.

In their midst only Sturla remained erect, facing the water with arms folded. When his disciples were stilled, he cupped his hands to his mouth, drew a deep breath of the miasmic air, and issued a weird, shrieking cry: "Hriak-ak-ak!" It echoed across the lagoon and faded to silence. He raised his pale hands, repeating it once, then again. "Hriak-ak-ak!" Silence.

Then his third cry was answered from the swamp.

Not that the response was the same sound. Though vaguely similar, it had more the quality of air being forced, against immense resistance, out of a huge, wet bladder. There was in that cry a croaking resonance no human throat could ever fully imitate.

The sound was repeated, louder this time, and nearer. Waves slapped the lagoon shore, indicating the approach through the water of something large.

If I fail adequately to describe what then waded out of a tree-girt reach of swamp — well, call it the first instance of my newfound squeamishness. When I boasted that I'd never seen a natural biological form that repelled me, much less one so loathsome as to make me avert my eyes, it was because my experience had been limited to the flora and fauna of Earth. I had seen nothing before that night that could truly be labeled a demon, an unholy abomination.

Of course, the thing was at least half-submerged. And given its bulk, it's doubtful that it ever could have lifted its nether part entirely out of the water. Hence, perhaps, its fondness for the primordial swamp as home.

Intelligent? Perhaps not in a human sense. But then, its immense powers may have placed it forever beyond the need of puny human intellect. That the Shaper was an astute, discriminating being was evident: from the way its dinner-plate eyes pivoted as it surveyed the waiting humans; from the ample size of the brain lobes it displayed as its barnlike body heaved up, sluicing off sheets of water and oil; and, from the careful, discriminating way its mouth-feelers reached down and siezed three of its awed worshipers, among them Zig Larkin, to be drawn up shrieking into its vast, amorphous maw.

By the time the others began to stagger and crawl back from their kneeling places, I was groping blindly inside my waterlogged duffel bag. Only one possible weapon was at hand: the flare pistol in its watertight plastic case. I fumbled it open, twisted a cartridge into the gun grip, and stepped clear of the undergrowth.

Of course, I wasn't blind to the danger of using an incendiary weapon. With oil flowing from the earth nearby and volatile gases steaming lazily off the swamp, the risk was extreme and obvious.

Yet by then I'd written off the chance of there being any survivors, including myself. My own life and those of the remaining cultists seemed somehow unimportant at that moment, in view of the enormous, absolute menace of the Rising and the intense hatefulness of the thing whose face, or facelike appendage, was looming each moment horribly nearer.

I fired.

Light flared and, forgetting all, I turned to run. But I'd barely spun away when, instantaneously, a blast wave sped me along into a tangle of ferns, scorching my ears and the back of my neck. As I was picking myself up, with the vast detonation still throbbing in my pain-ridden head, I risked looking back.

The Shaper was a quivering mass of flame. It belched and bleated thunderously, dragging itself back toward the lagoon's center. But a sheet of living fire was flying across the foul water, engulfing other bulky forms that had been rising from its depths. Gases were igniting in flares that streamed high overhead. Trees at the water's edge began exploding into flame.

None of the cultists were visible on the beach except Sturla, who stood fast at the shore. He had been transfigured into a tall torch — one that sagged slowly, limply to earth as I watched.

The mingled exultation and disgust I felt were both soon overruled by panic, and I flung myself away, running blindly — against a cool breeze that flowed toward the heart of the fire storm blossoming behind me. From time to time new shocks and flashes overtook me, while the sounds emitted by the burning Shapers fell to hoarse, monotonous bellows and subsided. My memories of the flight are few, but blindingly bright: the explosions; the spectacle of escaping cultists caught in lake shallows, in a day-blaze of orange firelight, beset by lunging, snapping sea beasts attacking frenziedly even as the marsh all around them blazed up; and a glance back at the ruined tower, reduced to a wilting steel candle in a jet of flame that roared skyward from the center of a Hades of dancing fire.

After that, the holocaust receded to a towering glow in the dark sky. Memory doesn't supply me any other details. My senses were scorched and overloaded, my reactions merely automatic; they led me, semiconscious, in a painful, infinitely prolonged descent that ended in oblivion.

When the mental curtain lifted, it was morning. I saw that I was in the cabin of the *Narwhal*, slumped in the pilot's chair. Sea motion was trying to toss me out, but more insistent was the sloshing of brine against my calves, for the vessel was almost awash.

I arose unsteadily, found my way to the rail, and surveyed a glinting, unbounded expanse of ocean.

I stood there, reeling more from weakness and confusion than from the roll of the light seas. My mind had to reach and grope, first, tamely, to recall my acquisition of the boat. Then the night's events began to tumble forth like sinister toys from a high closet shelf; I glimpsed each one with a mounting sense of disbelief. Finally, my thoughts grounded abruptly, jarringly, on the realization of having lost Jean. Totally and irrevocably. The intensity of that feeling made it impossible for me to doubt all the rest.

Physical exhaustion made the weight of despair all the more crushing. My regard for her must have been deeply felt. When I turned my face into the breeze, I knew that my eyes were wet with more than seawater.

Yet plenty of distraction, both from sorrow and wonder, lay in my surroundings. It was a fair, calm day with visibility limited by a silver-gray haze. No land, either freakish or natural, was in sight. Even the sea looked normal, except for some floating oil smears on the waves. *Narwhal*, back in

her element, was pitching sluggishly; the water inboard, that helped stabilize her motion, also told of damage to the hull. I switched on the bilge pump and found that it still worked.

As to what had happened, I had to conclude that the fugitive sea had flooded back during my unconsciousness. Whether its return had left any land intact — or indeed, any earthly human artifacts besides my boat — was for the time being imponderable. Of course, I began to entertain doubts of my own memories, and of my sanity, but it all remained vivid to me. My shoes were so caked with tar that I threw them overboard, and my eyes and skin were still scorched by the world-cleansing fire I'd kindled. Although others later attributed my physical depletion and my burns to a day of exposure in a drifting boat, I see their dismissals as cynical maneuvers, or as facile props to their own sanity.

During the hours I labored to get the engine back into operation, I needn't have worried about the fate of mankind. Before nightfall, a Coast Guard cutter hove into view. It closed quickly with my wallowing craft and took me aboard. She was returning from an otherwise fruitless search for *Daffodil* survivors. The swamped *Narwhal* was abandoned, and I was taken to Morro Bay and the busy emergency facility that had been set up there.

In the absence of any other witnesses to prove confirmation, my account must indeed have sounded like ravings to the guardsmen and medics. When we put into port, they gave me prompt access to higher personnel, but my debriefings by Coast Guard officers, police, and Exoco staff were conducted with what was either maddening ignorance or artful skepticism. Some of the questions they asked, and some of the flickers of their eyes, showed me that they had an inkling of the truth. But they chose to hush it up. Perhaps their "high deniability profile" will be adequate to guard us against another Rising. I pray so.

By the time I was released to face the press, I knew the score. My public testimony conformed to the scant information that was officially acknowledged: a low-intensity but amazingly prolonged seismic episode, associated with record low tides and freakishly dense fog; the complete absence of one night's high tide, followed by the vicious little locally generated tidal wave that swept the area clear of shipping and that battered coastal towns. While the wave did damage to San Luis and Morro harbors, it was mild compared to the tsunami that later struck the Hawaiian Islands.

Of course, the worst disaster in human terms was the sinking of the *Daffodil* platform with all hands. The burning oil leak that resulted was brought under control weeks later by the injection of concrete into deep subocean strata. That reportedly licked the problem — although it's been hard in the months since then to get a trustworthy estimate of the rate of continuing oil seepage from the ocean floor.

My own silence continues. If I hadn't said what I was expected to say, the legal problems arising from my theft of the boat could have been worse, and

my standing at the university would be laughable. Of course, my instinct was to put up a fight, even in my weakened state, until I finally realized the situation. No one was going to believe me.

Admittedly, it's been made easier, and my recovery has been speeded, by my closeness to Jean Hinchcliffe. That she was ashore, on sick leave, at the time of the disaster was blessed good luck for us; rather the opposite for Blair Vincent, who was working in her place. I found my feelings for her shared and requited, and her love has erased much of the horror. But not all.

Our life is tranquil, except for my little preoccupations and mental after-shocks. She comforts me after the dreams, tolerates my obsessive monitoring of offshore sightings of sharks and other sea life, and carries more of the burden of my college job than I like to admit. I think she will stay.

Yet it's not the same as if she'd heard the full story — or worse, believed it. The knowledge exacts a toll, and I wouldn't want to inflict it on her. The innocent pleasure she still takes in walking on the beach, for instance — would it continue if she saw, as I do, the strange properties of the bunker oil that now washes southward from Pismo Bay? I've seen others notice it and recoil, but none so much as I — repelled by its clinging texture, its rank smell, and the way that, when scraped from your skin, it always seems to leave a smear vaguely resembling the form of a fern leaf, or fish, or claw.

No, it's too hateful. I'll keep silent.



NOTE ATTACHED TO A CRYOGENIC CORPSE

PEOPLE OF THE FUTURE:

Just in case you have forgotten
what these diseases were like,
I have frozen some for you.
Unfortunately,
I had nothing to ship them in
but this old man.
You can throw him away
when you get them unpacked.

Eternally yours,
DEATH

Inflections

The Readers

Readers and writers, take note! Please be aware that all materials — manuscript submissions, letters to the editor, subscription problems — should be sent to our editorial office: Amazing® Stories, P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price,

Shame on you for printing that turid pile of pedagogic pomposity, "Hard? Science? Fiction?" by Gregory Benford [July 1987 issue]. The piece was pretentious, lazy-minded, and read as though it had been written on a caffeine jag at 4 ayem. Benford accomplishes nothing by trying to savage cyberpunk, except to waste the first half of the article. The second half is wasted on a discourse on the beauty of the new physics, only vaguely referring to the authors who have made extensive use of "hard" science. In fact, the entire thrust of the article seems to be that any science-fiction writer who isn't worshipping science with every key stroke is not a real science-fiction writer.

I hope this isn't part of some new editorial policy. I would hate to see *Amazing Stories* become a bastion of literary snobbery, especially since *Amazing Stories* was the magazine where I first discovered the word *cyberpunk*.

Yours,

J. B. Neumann
P.O. Box 272
LaCarne OH 43439

Dear Mr. Price,

Greg Benford has a good deal of interesting things to say about the (so-called) cyberpunk movement. He is right to say the writers sometimes lumped under this label don't have all that much in common. I don't think there is such a thing as a cyberpunk writer; rather cyberpunk is a style of writing that various authors sometimes use.

If cyberpunk is really so avant-garde, then how did it get to the movies in 1982 (*Blade Runner*) and network television in 1987 (*Max Headroom*)? Bruce Sterling's comment about cyberpunk reflecting "the modern Zeitgeist" gives us a hint. Cyberpunk has gotten attention and favorable notices from the mainstream precisely because it is *not* original, because it reflects the fashions and prejudices of the literary establishment. Cynicism. Pessimism. Anticapitalism.

Indeed, I wonder if one has to be somewhat left-wing to be one of the anointed. I find it rather maddening that after a century of mass murder perpetrated by anticapitalist governments (in the Soviet Union, Germany, China, Cambodia, etc.) so many writers can find no other target than the alleged iniquities of big business. It's like yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater when the real fire is outside the exits.

Sincerely,

Taras Wolansky
Clay Hill Road
Kerhonkson NY 12446

Obviously, these two readers have different opinions of Greg Benford's assessment of the cyberpunk subgenre. But, let's do get one fact straight: cyberpunk is more a marketing label than a literary movement, since it's easier for book salesmen (and publishers and editors) to sell such diverse talents as Gibson, Sterling, Shiner, Laidlaw, et al. as a group concept.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price:

I have gone over the September 1987 issue of *Amazing Stories*, and I must say that I was impressed by most of the stories (especially "Moon of Popping Trees" by R. Garcia y Robertson and "Hitchhiker" by Sheila Finch) and by the beautifully rendered cover by Bob Eggleton. But I was sort of miffed by Paul Di Filippo's "Kid Charlemagne." I mean, it was an okay story and all, but do you really want to publish gay stories? Is this another of *Amazing's* new editorial directions? Does this sort of thing belong in SF? I don't think so! Just wanted to let you know.

Yours,
Name Withheld
Sioux Falls SD

First, though the protagonist of "Kid Charlemagne" was a homosexual man, the story's focus wasn't specifically on homosexuality. Rather, the focus was on love, trust, manipulation, and personal pain and growth — topics that are important to all of us, whether our sexual orientation leans toward hetero-, bi-, or homosexuality.

Secondly, as a magazine of science fiction, the editorial direction focuses on people coping with future possibilities: technology, scientific applications, social behavior, etc. Thus, we aren't inclined to reject a story simply because it presents

homosexual characters, as we as readers can learn from all people.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Patrick,

Enclosed are the page proofs for my upcoming story. I was glad to see that Steve Fabian will illustrate the story. Did you grant my wish, or anticipate it?

Now, business aside for a moment: my compliments on the September 1987 issue of *Amazing Stories*. While the whole issue is enjoyable, Paul Di Filippo's "Kid Charlemagne" is particularly good. I don't get to do nearly as much reading as I'd like to now that I'm busy writing, and it is a real pleasure to find a short story that stays with me after the last word has been read.

Best regards,
Nancy V. Berberick
P.O. Box 278
Blairstown NJ 07825

Dear Pat,

Since Richard Wilson is — sadly — no longer with us, and thus unable to comment, I thought I'd mention the typo in the 2nd line of his poem ["IBM, My Shipmate"] in the September 1987 issue. A guess. Since all subsequent couplets are rhymed, then the end of line 2 should have been "2100" or perhaps "2200." "2000" just doesn't go with "thundered."

Also, I have enjoyed Bruce Boston's latest poems in your pages a great deal, especially the piece on the starship navigator in the March 1987 issue. He reads it on a recording by Sound Photosynthesis made at Sercon I (also includes poems by Andrew Joron) as well. Memorable piece: "In the Eyes of the Pilot."

Please, more poems by Susan Palwick (stories, too). Since she won

the Rhysling Award for Best Short Poem last year (due to be reprinted, I hear, in *Nebula Awards*, vol. 22) with "The Neighbor's Wife" from *Amazing Stories*, I've awaited others.

Your avid poetry reader,
Robert Frazier
P.O. Box 491
Nantucket MA 02554

Thanks, Bob, for your concern about the typo. But actually, Dick did want "2000" in line 2; we queried him ourselves when we first received the poem for review. You see, "2000" should be pronounced as "twenty hundred," not "two

thousand" — one of Dick's plays on words to check the alertness of the reader.

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs. After all, you are reading this magazine for personal enjoyment. Also, feel free to respond to other issues — be they about writing, the SF and fantasy community, or the state of affairs in the world at large. We do value your opinions, though we may not agree with them. So, write us!

Till next issue.

— Patrick Lucien Price



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First you must institutionalize your novelty.

Fright creates aliens; processes unfamiliar breed distrust until product need is shown. That your planet fills a vacuum is your selling point.

Tailor the bizarre to Earthly tastes. Court exposure in every possible medium, but be reserved; neither intruder nor visitor, but a negotiating partner.

As for the human condition, to bear that is to gain competitive edge, for such honesty endures here no matter what your shape, no matter where you came from.

Then, you will know when to land your first ships.

It is when you feel you are coming home, and when we greet you with a warmth that tells you we never realized you'd been gone.

— Elissa Malcohn

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